

Representing South Asian alterity? East London's Asian electronic music scene and the articulation of globally mediated identities

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ABSTRACT In the years since the London tube bombings, popular depictions of British Asians have been increasingly 'othered' at best, and stereotyped as dangerous terrorists at worst. Asian self-representation continues to be a critically-needed intervention. East London's Asian electronic music scene serves as a means to represent the voices of young urban British Asians, attempting to bring them from peripheral alterity and render them visible in mainstream British popular culture. The music, which blends synthesized electronic music with South Asian musical stylings, has brought musicians from both the South Asian diaspora and the subcontinent to perform in 'Banglatown', East London. These regular globalized performances of the scene, an aspect rarely investigated, have challenged locally bounded British Asian identities.

KEYWORDS *British Asians, diaspora, East London, ethnicity and culture, identity and music, South Asian popular culture*

We were fighting racism, full-on ... keeping the middle finger in full view.
 (Aki Nawaz, 2006; frontman of Fun-da-mental)

Life is a struggle, everyday is a hustle ... life is hard as a young Muslim man.
 (Boys from the East, 'Untitled', © ADFED)

The 'Shilpa Shetty affair' in 2007, in which the Bollywood actress was treated to a volley of racist vitriol and bullying on the British reality television show *Big Brother*, is one of the more publicized examples of the racial 'othering' of South Asian bodies. Earlier, media coverage of the 2005 London tube bombings had revealed the fact that Britain's epistemic



engagement with Asians¹ and Asian cultures is ‘othered’ at best, and demonized as violent at worst. With British Asian men still facing disproportionate police ‘stop and searches’, it is no surprise that many are fearful of publicly expressing their identities. However, one musical subculture in East London has been articulating publicly this tenuous state of urban Asian identities. The Asian electronic music scene in East London not only challenges negative Asian stereotypes, but also provides a local platform for representing alterior Asian identities. Ultimately, the scene has had some success in ameliorating the lack of British Asian voices in accessible public cultural spaces.

Historically, British Asian musics (e.g. bhangra) have been relegated to spaces within ‘ethnic Asian’ neighbourhoods, such as Ealing, Harrow, Southall and Wembley, in Greater London. In effect, these remained in ghettoized isolation compared to similar white British public cultural spaces. They were separate and unequal. The move of some South Asian musics from the cultural periphery to the centre has done much for the public representation of the lives and cultures of this particular segment of mostly middle-class young Asians. This is not to say that these interventions have debased or infiltrated what John Rawls calls ‘the public political culture’ (2007: 6) (i.e. the dominant, everyday public culture). Rather, the motive of some in the Asian electronic scene has been to challenge this cultural hegemony by fostering what Hannah Arendt (1958) terms a ‘public realm’, a space which highlights and celebrates heterogeneities. Similarly, my invocation of (dominant) public spheres and public spaces centres around their potential for exclusion and inclusion.

This article will introduce the scene and its significance and then use particular ethnographic case studies, such as the Nasha Experience collective and Shiva Soundsystem, to elaborate the workings of minority cultural production and its negotiation of national inclusion or exclusion. It stems from a larger research project, and as I have written about this elsewhere (Murthy 2007a, 2007b, 2008), this article is restricted in its remit and intentionally limits discussions of broader, although relevant, issues including hybridity and authenticity. The musicians involved are predominantly young Asian males, and I conceive of the scene as a largely heterosexual masculine space. The few women involved are usually rendered ‘invisible’, in that they are involved behind the scenes in public relations, production and administration. Ethnographic examples of Asian women (participants and organizers) are included when possible, but are acknowledged from the outset as minimal.

The Asian electronic music scene

The Asian electronic music subculture is a ‘scene’ which can be traced to the UK in the early 1990s with the rise of British Asian musicians such as



Rehmi and Nitin Sawhney, as well as Asian-dominated record labels such as Outcaste, Nation, Nasha and Swaraj. The geographical nexus of the scene was and is 'Banglatown' in the East End of London: as the name suggests, an inner-city and predominantly Bangladeshi neighbourhood. Asian electronic music is characterized by a mix of some of the following:

- electronic digital manipulation;
- one or more traditional Hindustani instruments such as the tabla, sitar, sarangi or veena (or samples of them);
- Asian vocalists;
- lyrics and samples broadly relating to South Asia;
- samples of Bollywood tracks, but generally a rhythm line similar to drum and bass;
- downtempo;
- jungle; and
- other electronic musics.²

In contradistinction to bhangra, Asian electronic music generally is not lyrically driven, although any lyrical inclusion is significant to the music's meaning, consumption and distinctive aesthetic.

Dis-Orienting Rhythms (Sharma et al., 1996), the seminal book which critically introduced the cultural politics of Asian dance musics,³ is now more than a decade old. Since its publication, Asian electronic music has grown in several areas with established diasporic South Asian populations, such as Melbourne, New York, San Francisco, Singapore and Toronto.⁴ At the same time, a lively recorded and performative scene has developed in India, with regular events in Delhi and past performances in Mumbai, Bangalore and Hyderabad. In the words of one of the editors of *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*, Sanjay Sharma (2006), with hindsight the 'globalized politics' of the music is what the book lacks. This article aims to begin to fill this gap by analyzing the music's political aesthetic in London, negotiated through globally mediated performative events. A simplistic interpretation in terms of an anti-racist political aesthetic will be avoided in order to draw out the more nuanced cultural politics behind these events.

Specifically, the live moments in which the diaspora meets homeland (subcontinental musicians and disc jockeys (DJs) perform in London) and diaspora meets diaspora (e.g. Indian American and Indo-Canadian musicians or DJs perform in London) have challenged the notion of tightly bounded local Asian ethnic identities in London. Rather, the engagement, not only across the diaspora but also with the subcontinent, has exposed the transnationality of diasporic South Asian identities. Although there is a plurality of Asian youth experiences in London, most Asian attendees at the scene's events are middle class and usually (but by no means exclusively) well-educated. These similarities have enabled the production of a distinct politicized aesthetic which emphasizes the need to challenge the position of Asian cultural representations in British popular culture. In

this case, what is meant by a politicized aesthetic is that these globally mediated performative events are themselves political objects which represent, engage and encourage discourses (totalizing and divisive) of South Asian identities.

Talvin's tabla: the rise of Asian electronic music

Dance music termed as 'Asian' is sufficiently distinctive to defy consistent musical categorization. For example, the compact discs (CDs) of Talvin Singh have found their home in the electronic music and world music sections of record shops, and Nitin Sawhney has been described regularly as an 'Acid Jazz' musician.⁵ However, despite the overt differences in musical aesthetics, a common politicized thread of critical importance can be extracted from the work of many Asian electronic artists. Music has provided a way to render the lived experiences of this group of British Asians visible in white-dominated British popular culture. Additionally, the live performance of this music in mainstream venues – in contrast to the Asian spaces of bhangra remix, Bollywood or wedding performances – not only makes this scene distinct, but also has provided a means by which creative young Asians can publicly represent expressions of their cultural experiences against a backdrop of cultural exclusion.

Most agree that, despite his later arrival to Asian electronic music, Talvin Singh was most responsible (albeit inadvertently) for making this



332 *Figure 1* Talvin Singh in East London (Photograph by the Author)



music known in British popular culture. His highly influential Mercury Prize winning album, *OK* (1998), along with *Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground* (1997), which he compiled, spurred British Asian electronic music into an overground musical 'movement'.⁶ Like it or not, brown dance music became the new black – at least for one musical season. Now, the everyday histories and lives of these diasporic British Asians were being made audible and visible within public British culture. For example, Cornershop's '6am Jullandar Shere' (1995), which interprets a quotidian Punjabi call to prayer through the more unique medium of indie fused with electronica, was aired regularly on mainstream radio stations, including BBC Radio 1.

As the scene became quite established overground in the late 1990s, record companies were all too keen to pigeonhole a whole set of diverse Asian artists into the category of Asian underground. This racial niche marketing was not confined to record companies. Multinational corporations such as Philips used the music to give their marketing campaigns an exotic allure.⁷ The (now highly commercialized) Asian overground became a catch-all space where everyone from Andrew Lloyd Webber (with his musical *Bombay Dreams*) to the former prime minister's wife Cherie Blair becoming enamoured with 'all things brown'.⁸ The rise of Asian electronic music artists was valuable in terms of increasing Asian visibility and audibility in British popular culture. In this way, the commercial success of the music was not inherently problematic. However, its presence was commodified racially with commercial success contingent on racialization. This is a tension which cannot be overstressed.

In reality, the chosen racialization was 'Disneyfied' and did little to represent the realities of many Asian lives. As Banerjea describes, Asian underground performances became 'a sanitized encounter with an imagined Asian "other"' (2000: 65), by which he means that these engagements with Asians were relegated to superficial contact with an exoticized Asian aesthetic rather than meaningful interactions with British Asians. Specifically, Asians were packaged as street-friendly decorative ethnic chic. Engagement with uncomfortable Asian 'others' (especially Asian Muslims) was virtually non-existent. Mainstream style and fashion magazines such as *Wallpaper* and *i-D* celebrated these events as a triumph of Asian fashion and culture (see Khan, 1997). However, sometimes inadvertently, as was the case with *i-D*, these hype-laden portrayals presented a new, post-Stephen Lawrence, multicultural Britain. Everyday racisms and ghettoization were rendered invisible.⁹ The Asian cultural traditions extolled as authentic in these performances played down the ghettoized state of Asians in London. Furthermore, the recurrent exposure of 'Asian Kool' stereotypes resulted in a rhizomatic propagation of a carefully constructed Asian 'other' (Huq, 1996). In other words, these representations of Asians literally took root and generated offshoots.



Racism and Asian dance music

Historically, Banglatown and the nearby Spitalfields area have been home to Britain's Bangladeshi community. However, these areas, where the Asian electronic music scene has flourished, also suffer from soaring unemployment rates amongst Bangladeshis (Office for National Statistics, 2001). This has been compounded by the renewed racism of a post-9/11 and 7/7 Britain in which strong currents of Islamophobia have led to physical and verbal abuse against South Asians in general (Poynting and Mason, 2006; Ramamurthy, 2006). Although Trevor Phillips (2005), chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, reports that attacks specifically triggered by 9/11 and 7/7 have subsided, musicians and participants in the Asian electronic music scene report otherwise. From their perspective, a significant number of Banglatown's young British Bangladeshi Muslim men remain ostracized from gainful employment as well as suffer continued physical and verbal abuse. It is within this context that the Boys from the East, quoted earlier, sing that 'life is hard as a young Muslim man'. One of the means by which disenfranchised youths, such as Boys from the East, have left the streets has been through community music projects.¹⁰

Such was the case with Nasha Records, an Asian electronic music label run by second-generation British Bangladeshis. I observed members of Nasha from 2004–6 at their events in London, on tour in India and at home. Their lives in council flats in Tower Hamlets, for example, are in sharp contrast to the mainly middle-class lives of the scene's followers. Ges-e, co-founder of Nasha and a DJ/producer for the Nasha Experience collective, recounted to me that there were very limited opportunities for young British Bangladeshis in the early 1990s. A community youth music project 'got him off the streets' of East London and soon after he and his friend Shahid began DJing what came to be considered Asian electronic music. East London venues such as the Davenant Centre, Enzyne Youth Club in Wapping, Trinity Church in Poplar and Woodsend Youth Club gave Ges-e, Shahid and other young British Bangladeshis a means to express creatively what Ges-e refers to as their 'cultural heritage' as second-generation British Asians. Collaborations with Talvin Singh on Anokha projects inculcated a strong entrepreneurial sentiment in Ges-e, Shahid and others – a feeling lacking before their contact with Asian electronic music. Along with friends from the Tower Hamlets College radio station (which Ges-e and Shahid helped to found), they used their small savings from DJing and releases as the seed capital for Nasha Records, a label which has supported young British Asian DJs for more than a decade.

The story of Ges-e and Nasha is hardly unique in the borough of Tower Hamlets. Rather, Asian electronic music has provided a commercially viable, racially inclusive outlet for young East End British Asians to articulate creatively their experiences. As Saha's (2006) research on



Figure 2 Ges-e and Shahid of Nasha (Photograph by the Author)

Asian record labels has found, much of Asian electronic music has been propagated by small independent outfits. Ges-e and Aki Nawaz (2006), frontman of Fun-da-mental, agree that the majors were not interested in most Asian electronic music. Even Talvin Singh, a darling of the major labels in the late 1990s, broke into the music industry in the late 1980s through initial work on Nation Records, a small label co-founded by Nawaz, which actively supports musicians from minority ethnic groups. However, the positive aspect of the major labels' myopia was that these artists could express their political sentiments liberally through tracks and benefit gigs.¹¹ Furthermore, as with the early music of Asian Dub foundation and Fun-da-mental, the assertive entrepreneurial endeavours of Ges-e and other young British Bangladeshis challenged what Sharma has referred to as the 'supposed onlooker status and passivity of Asians in a white-dominated music industry' (1996: 48).

The numerous live events hosted by Nasha, Anokha, Sitarfunk, Swaraj Records, Shiva Soundsystems, Samosafunk as well as Nation and Outcaste Records, spearheaded the turn of Banglatown 'from an abusive stigma of East London's ghetto to a celebration of placed ethnicity' (Keith, 2005: 8). However, Keith is only partially correct in his observation that 'Banglatown' has been 'inverted and translated' into a form of 'identification and solidarity' (2005: 8), as this remains the case for a small minority of British Bangladeshis. Most of the beneficiaries of Banglatown's celebratory



imagery have been Hoxton's and Spitalfields' new, mostly young, white professional settlers eager to be part of the East End's fashionable ethnic chic. Their engagement with Asians living in the area is sanitized carefully at best, and non-existent at worst. Sonia Mehta, Director of the East London-based Asian Dub Foundation Education community music project, adds that these 'gentrification' processes occurring in Bangladeshi East London are 'pushing migrants to the periphery ... allowing a more financially viable [white] community' (Mehta, 2006) to move in, a view supported by Chris Hamnett's (2003) research on gentrification in London. As Banglatown's new white settlers happily club at Asian electronic music events, Mehta's (2006) opinion is that police 'stop and search' orders have increased dramatically overnight, a trend which is in line with general reports that young British Asian Muslim men have been disproportionately stopped and searched (Dodd and Travis, 2005, Human Rights Watch, 2005). There have been 14,620 searches carried out in Scotland by the British Transport Police. According to the force's own figures, 12 percent of those stopped have been of a minority ethnic group, while they make up only 2 percent of the population as a whole (Fraser and Adams, 2007). It is claimed by the Scottish Islamic Foundation that non-white people are six times more likely to be targeted through stop-and-search in Scotland (Williams, 2008). Ultimately, Banglatown-as-ghetto persists, despite the ongoing encroachment and gentrification of Banglatown and its surrounding areas. The trendy 'ethnic chic' portrayal of the area remains a thin veneer, masking the run-down council accommodation, shocking poverty and high unemployment which are the lot of the majority of British Bangladeshis in the area.

In the following sections, I will introduce another Asian collective, Shiva Soundsystem, along with six respondents (two male British Indian musicians, a male British Bangladeshi student, a male British Bangladeshi youth worker, a female British Indian media consultant and a female British Indian vocalist and youth worker).

'Break Lane Mix'¹²

Through the shared musical aesthetic of Asian electronic music, a unique collective bond between ethnically diverse (although, it should be said, predominantly heterosexual male) British Asians has developed. Like their parents before them, British Asians (of Bangladeshi, East-African, Indian, Pakistani and Trinidadian ancestries) from a range of socio-economic and religious backgrounds are identifying with each other through an 'Asian music'. This is exemplified by Shiva Soundsystem's 'Independence Day Mutiny'. This annual event, billed as a celebration of India's and Pakistan's independence, features musicians from the global Asian diaspora, who together 'represent' Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Through its engagement across the Asian diaspora, the Independence



Day Mutiny, like the Indian Mutiny of 1857, to which its name alludes, has formed solidarities between diverse groups of participants. The use of ‘mutiny’ by Shiva Soundsystem subverts traditional conceptions of nationally bounded British Asian identities. The celebration of Indian and Pakistani independence as ‘mutiny’ should be read as a critical subaltern epistemological intervention. Speaking with musicians and attendees, the event-as-mutiny was considered to challenge the continuing hegemony of white Britain over its Asian ‘others’. Even if the musical text-as-mutiny remains untranslatable, the performative event as a mutiny by the Asian ‘other’ is critical. That is, the public performance here represents not just cultural assertiveness – a very visible demonstration of a particular strand of ‘Asianness’ in a British public space – but also a platform to deconstruct representations of Asians as an ‘other’.

In this way, the live performances by Indian DJs from Ahmedabad, Delhi and Mumbai, alongside British Asian DJs at other events, challenges prevailing dominant hegemonic representations of Asianness. The articulation of Asian identities at these events is unique and has developed not only from dialogic interactions between diaspora and homeland, but also in conversation with the scene’s many white attendees. Again, this is in sharp distinction to other Asian musical scenes. However, the exposure of the complex, globalized character of British Asian identities in East London has not displaced or undermined the binary stereotype of Asian as terrorist ‘demon’ or Eastern ‘exotica’ (Hutnyk, 2006: 77). That being said, the idea that the participants in this subculture are a hybrid germination of Bangladeshi, Indian, Indo-African, Indo-Trinidadian or Pakistani and British becomes untenable when one sees that the British Asians involved are not only engaging with British Asians from varied socio-economic backgrounds and national ancestries, but also engaging regularly with young musicians from the subcontinent and the global South Asian diaspora.

For example Akhtar, a 25-year-old British Bangladeshi student from Tower Hamlets, saw the Bandish Projekt (a duo from Ahmedabad, India) perform. I interviewed him outside the Vibe Bar on Brick Lane, a street on which his family has done their shopping since he was a child. For him, a media tendency to depict India as either mired in poverty (cf. *Salaam Bombay!*, dir. Mira Nair, 1988) or a land of exotic people had prevailed, a feeling which had negatively shaped his self-perception. This is in consonance with Franz Fanon’s (1966[1961]) argument that pejorative identities can be self-ascribed with much the same vigour as laudatory ones. Akhtar described to me how this performance of two fashionable Indian DJs challenged his rather condescending view of the subcontinent and made him feel a sense of ‘pride’ and ‘respect’ for the Bangladesh and India of the 21st century. The energy behind this change of view was more than palatable. This one globally mediated performance added a transnational element to Akhtar’s own conception of what it meant to be British Asian.



Akhtar's experience in the scene also provides a concrete example of the local–global production of ethnic identities which Appadurai (1996) and Bhabha (1994) have theorized.

I met Hanif, a 29-year-old youth worker who also helps to run an Asian electronic music website, at his flat in Bow, East London, an inner-city neighbourhood in which he was born and raised. He told me how British Asian youths in the area felt 'culturally lost' in Britain and were drawn to the streets after repeated failures in entering the formal economy. Hanif feels that Asian electronic music has helped him to 'connect' with his 'ancestral roots'. He feels that the scene's events gave him more insider knowledge about Bangladesh, the country of his ancestry, which he has not visited since he was six. Seen through the transnational flows of Asian electronic music in East London, British Asian identities cannot be demarcated neatly into putative British and Asian 'essences', an argument which Gilroy (1993) and others have made in reference to black identities. Rather, these globally mediated performances, which Appadurai (1996) would consider to be products of transnational 'scapes', bring into sharp contrast the complex, networked identities of these Asian Londoners in which inherited categories and stereotypes of 'traditional' British Asians and South Asians are broken down.

It is tempting to conceive the visible group of musicians and regular participants who inhabit Asian dance musics in merely political terms – as a challenge to the hegemonic, for example. Although they do question the prevailing stereotypes of Asian popular culture, these events should not be read as rupturing them. On the contrary, the essentialisms of Asian popular culture as *exotica* are very much alive. Nonetheless, these events as a mesh of networks contribute to the audibility of alternative Asian voices. This is especially the case in collaborations with the global Asian diaspora as well as with non-diasporic Indians, events which have opened new transnational discursive modalities of deconstructing these essentialisms. In addition, the identities created through this globally networked Asian cultural space can be read as not only problematizing dominant Asian ethnic archetypes, but also the essentialisms created and maintained by Asians.

For example, at an event in London in September 2006, DJ Nerm, a British Asian DJ and founder of Shiva Soundsystem (which will be introduced subsequently), remixed a classic track by the well-known Bollywood playback singer Lata Mangeshkar. The Bandish Projekt, a duo of Indian DJs from Gujarat mentioned earlier, decided to respond with some drum and bass beats, a genre traditionally associated with London. In addition to the blurring of the global and the local, this example illustrates how the expectation of the Indian musician to sample Indian sounds was destabilized by the drum and bass response. However, the archetype of the British Asian DJ as 'modern' or western is not quite corrupted by the nostalgic 1960s Bollywood Mangeshkar 'call', as it fuses musical stylings



from both the diaspora and homeland.¹⁵ The subcontinent also becomes increasingly demystified through the Bandish Projekt's contribution to this exchange: a realization which itself disrupts some Orientalist self-mystification. Their physical presence at a fashionable London club perhaps does this more than the music that came out of their DJ console that night. Ultimately, the role-play of diasporic Asian as a traditional, exotic 'other' becomes tenuous when the homeland itself is conceptualized increasingly as 'modern' and same.

Interventions of presence

I found that, despite diverse ancestral affiliations and to some extent class differences, the Asians who attend these events identify with each other through a shared musical aesthetic. Instruments and sounds traditionally linked with the Indian subcontinent have a pan-South Asian diasporic appeal in this scene. Specifically, the respondents seemed to be bound together through a mutual 'pride' in the fact that music with overt South Asian influences had achieved international commercial acclaim. Although the respondents emphasized that the attractiveness of the subculture is the music, not ethnicity, it is hard to see how the two can be separated. Whereas external racialization of the music can be distinguished, an internally driven pan-South Asian politics of cultural expression and survival cannot be always appreciable. First, the marketing of the subculture and its music involves globally mediated Asian ethnicities which are not always recognizable as such. Second, the music is not extricable from the greater political discourse of cultural legitimacy, at least when played out in the diaspora. Third, ethnicity is invoked by the media to categorize the musical aesthetic of this scene. This construction of the scene as generically 'Asian' inadvertently fosters an intra-Asian affinity with, or consciousness of, this music. The crux is that for various reasons, these ethnically diverse Asian youths are identifying with each other through a shared, globally mediated musical aesthetic. Previous work on Asian electronic music has dealt well with the politics of the music and issues of recognition and identity (Sharma et al., 1996). However, it has not concretized an understanding of ethnicity negotiated through Asian dance music as a globally networked movement.

At the time of my interviews in 2005, Shiva Soundsystem was based in a warehouse loft in the infamously titled 'murder mile' area of Hackney, East London. Its music making is known to engage not only diverse sections of the Asian diaspora, but also those outside of it (perhaps a product of the multiplicity of Hackney itself). Its eye-catching flyers and website also draw attention to the transnationality of this music scene. For example, the flyer above (Figure 3), an advertisement for an event by the Shiva Soundsystem 'crew', exemplifies a globally mediated textual and visual contestation of British Asian (double) identities. In terms of the text,



Figure 3 Flyer for Mahatma's Revenge, May 2005 (© Kunal Anand@Cabein.com)

the night is positioned as a site where Asian identities are being aurally deconstructed. In the words of its promoters, Mahatma's Revenge is a product of translation. The inputs into the translation are 'confusion', 'anarchy', 'double identity' and 'hybridity'. These then undergo a 'cultural mutation', which produces 'soundscapes of Eastern influenced breaks and beats'. One should note that this 'mutation' itself is globalized, as the event includes performances by a South Asian-American diasporic group,



Dhamaal, alongside the resident British Asian DJs. The visual also enters the discursive space of transnationally mediated double identity and hybridity through the invocation and ridicule of hyper-essentialized tropes of Britishness and ‘Asianness’.

This particular flyer was selected for several reasons. First, it explicitly engages with the identities and representation of British Asian youth. Targeting a particular market that is acquainted with the language of cultural studies, the flyer asserts its legitimacy as a site for contesting hybridity and cultural mutation. Second, the text argues that this contestation can be done aurally. This is done by invoking ‘cultural mutation into soundscapes’. Importantly, the event is considered a negotiation of hybridity within this context. Mahatma’s Revenge is argued textually and visually to be a partial product of double identity (cf. Du Bois, 1994[1903]). The textual and visual aesthetic negotiates a multiplicitous and ambiguous theoretical array. This marks a dramatic shift from the useful, but dated, politicized discourse of anti-racism or Asians as a dyad of British and Asian which were prevalent in previous studies of British Asian dance musics (e.g. *I’m British, But...* dir. G. Chadha, Channel 4, 1989; Hyder, 2004). However, one might wonder how extensive its appeal is, since events such as these also reflect the above average educational level of the target audience.

When I asked Nerm, a founder of Shiva Soundsystem, to elaborate on the choice of imagery in the flyer, he was keen to emphasize that the visual aesthetic of the flyer and its events in general were meant to be read as a ‘punk statement’, not exotic:

A multi-armed Beefeater carrying a pot of tea and a British passport, a raygun, a *degchi* [steel cooking bowl], a *nariyal* [*kalash*, ritual Hindu coconut on metal bowl] and some takeaway curry on a British flag – I don’t call that exotic, I call that punk. That is, if you look at the logo to it: that is a punk statement ... It isn’t an exotic statement at all. (personal interview with Nerm, Hackney, London, nd)

Nerm’s distinction between ‘punk’ and ‘exotic’, although ripe for analysis, is beyond the scope of this article. However, the fact that Nerm and his colleagues are making such distinctions in the first place is noteworthy. Specifically, the engagement with critical discourses on exoticism is virtually non-existent within most Asian dance music cultures. This places the Asian electronic music scene in a unique position. In contradistinction, the bhangra scene’s events, for example, are targeted usually to Asian youths (Hall, 2002). Bhangra musicians themselves have been known to construct the scene as ethnically ‘Asian’ (Baumann, 1996). In terms of attendees, the bhangra remix scene in London is also almost exclusively Asian, whereas at Asian electronic music events, Asians generally do not even make up the majority.

Within the present climate towards Asians, Shiva Soundsystem’s public contestation of Asian identities, vis-à-vis a critical engagement with the



language of the academy, is of the utmost importance. Nerm himself had been a victim of racial violence on his way back to Shiva Soundsystem's studio. Against this backdrop, hearing electronic music with tablas, sitars, raags, qawwals and other musical elements traditionally associated with the subcontinent in a London dancehall functions as a platform to articulate experiences such as these. In addition, the scene's success serves as proof that a diasporic Asian popular cultural form can infiltrate mainstream performance spaces.

The inclusion of subcontinental musical stylings into electronic dance musics has led many Asians to claim that the music is 'theirs' (despite the overwhelming influences of black diasporic musics, for example). I interviewed Poori, a 27-year-old British Indian media consultant from London and active participant of the scene at her office in North London. Her success in the media industry as an Asian woman is not only revealing of her class position and educational level, but is in sharp contrast with many of the inner-city South Asian women living in the East End of London. Poori perceives a special cultural connection to the music, which she feels gives her a greater understanding of the music: 'Hearing the Indian sounds is very nice ... I kind of feel it more ... maybe it's 'cos I'm Indian ... I don't know.' When Asian culture is being represented in a (trendy) British public cultural space, young Asians feel a sense of empowerment in which they become cultural insiders rather than maintaining their normal position of outsiders. In other words, these club spaces transform British Asians into the dominant 'us' rather than the minority 'other'.

For example, Hanif expressed to me that the inclusion of subcontinental musical stylings into drum and bass and jungle produced a special relationship between the former and Asian consumers, in that the music became transformed into an Asian cultural product:

When someone put in that kind of Asian samples and Indian samples into it [electronic dance musics], it just took it to the next level for you because you felt like it was yours ... Just that Indian-ness there made it yours a bit more than everyone else's.

He also believed that this perceived ownership of the music gave him a position of being part of the dominant ethnic culture of the club, rather than being in the minority, as he states that most rave and other electronic music scenes were predominantly white middle class:

Suddenly you felt like not only did you enjoy the bassline and the beats that were going around it ... but there was this sudden Indian sample that you could kind of relate to and when you heard it in the clubs you thought, 'I know this better than most people, I know these sounds, I know what this is.' And people coming up to you and asking you ... 'What's that sound, what is that instrument ... ?' And suddenly, you felt like you are bigger part of that scene ... it kind of made it ours in some sense. You kind of knew the DJs who were producing the music, you knew the club DJs. Friends, older brothers and relatives involved in it, and it just kind of felt like it was ours in a sense.



Poori and Hanif are suggesting that their Indian ethnicity might be facilitating a more intense relationship with live Asian electronic music versus other forms of live electronic music. Their responses provide insights into the motives for why Asians become regulars at these ethnically diverse events. For most Asian participants, producing or consuming Asian electronic music represents not only an element or artefact of their ethnic genealogies, but also an accessible modality of cultural representation.

Apna Sangeet?¹⁴

The ‘rooting’ of Asian electronic music to an authentic subcontinental essence has been a longstanding trend. More than a decade ago, nights such as Anokha were the subject of debates on whether they were exclusionary Asian cultural events. The Asian electronic music promoter, Sweety Kapoor, commented that the ‘Anokha style borrows from many cultures’ and that it was ‘international rather than just a combination of Asian and British’ (quoted in Sherwood, 1997: 3). Mukul, a Hackney-based ex-Anokha DJ turned visual artist, recounted to me that nights such as Anokha and Global Sweatbox featured Asian musicians, but the core musicians were very diverse. He observes that Marque Gilmore, an African American drummer from New York, Friedel Lelonek, a German drummer and DJ and Nelson Dilation, a dreadlocked white British DJ, were all part of the Anokha ‘crew’. Similarly, he emphasized that Björk and Africa Bambaataa were regulars at the club. For Mukul, this heterogeneous confluence of musical styles – not an emphasis of what he refers to as ‘Asian aspects’ – was the driving force behind Anokha’s musical successes. Talvin Singh agrees: ‘I don’t actually have such a big Asian following. People come to hear good music – not Asian music’ (quoted in Sherwood, 1997: 3).

Although Singh may have been keen to disassociate the music from ethnic labelling, the reality is that the music was not only widely labelled as ‘Asian’, but also its success was partially contingent on this. Although Nerm of Shiva Soundsystems considers his work to be ‘alternative music of Asian origin’ (personal interview with Nerm, Hackney, London, nd) and Ges-e of Nasha stresses its ability to articulate East London Asian identities, the press rarely played along. For example, an article in *The Times* reduced Ges-e’s music to ‘spicy Eastern sounds’ (Munday, 2004: 42).

Notwithstanding the critique of labelling the music as Asian, the reality is that it is considered to reflect Asian youths at some level. Nerm believes that the Shiva Soundsystem collective, for example, has changed people’s perceptions of Asians through its music, events, artwork and design. He feels that, for whatever reason, his DJing is taken to be reflective of Asians:

I’m very conscious of the fact that my attitudes and my behaviour will lead to that being applied to the entire race of brown people. I’m very aware that if there’s a group of rudeboys firing on a train, people are gonna view everyone brown as being like that. And it’ll just cause more social problems



by these stereotypes being generated. That's a really odd thing to say, but the idea that what you do, your reactions, carry weight for your entire race, is something that I've dealt with for a long time. (personal interview with Nerm, Hackney, London, nd)

Nerm's belief is that the gangsteresque 'rudeboy' images of young Asians – as fictionalized in *Londonstani* (Malkani, 2006) for example – are applied to Asians in general. He believes that Shiva Soundsystem presents counter-images of Asians which challenge these harmful Asian essentialisms. However, of note is the absence of any mention of the class differences between working-class rudeboys and the relatively comfortable lives of the participants in the Asian electronic music scene.

Conclusion

Gilroy's (2003) suggestion that there are difficulties in cohering a single overarching diasporic soundscape that reveals localization and globalization is useful. One solution is to search for a diasporic soundscape that reveals the localization and globalization of the local rather than the world. A case study of the local in the case of Asian electronic music does much to understand both the globalization and localization of Asian soundscapes at a global level. Viewing the London performances of Asian electronic music as a globally mediated event has challenged prevailing essentialisms that position second-generation Asians as post-modern hybrids – a facile embrace of 'Asianness' and 'Britishness'. First, the affirmation of the global in Asian electronic music through the regular performances of subcontinentally-based Asian electronic music DJs in London alongside local British Asian DJs raises critical questions for how we view diaspora, performance and Asian identities.¹⁵ Second, these frontier-breaking events have opened up new connections between diaspora and homeland, exposing both to astereotypical visions of each other. Third, the live performances continue to serve as a vehicle for making these Asian youths visible within British popular culture.

The common thread between these three conclusions is actually a tension. The live performance of Asian electronic music in London continuously negotiates a tightrope between the prevailing overarching tendency to essentialize ethnically any visible 'Asian' cultural product, and the powerful impulse of young urban British Asians to affirm anti-essentialized, everyday Asian lives. The regularity and nature of the global mediations in the live performance of the scene is the unique contribution made to this discourse. Where the local has failed to break Orientalist constructions of a homogeneous 'other', a globally mediated local does not. As the DJs from Delhi scratch drum and bass, they remind us that the pursuit of an overarching diasporic Asian soundscape perhaps echoes old ethnic essentialisms. Seeing, hearing and dancing to these subcontinental



musicians can and does shape, in real-time, the ethnic identities of some of the Asian Londoners who participate in the subculture. Despite its failings in terms of gender equality and class diversity, Asian electronic music continues to heed Nawaz's call of 'keeping the middle finger in full view' by making visible the lives of a segment of British Asian urban youths.

Notes

1. 'Asian' in this article follows the British usage in that it is synonymous with 'South Asian'.
2. For the purposes of this article, 'electronic music subcultures' broadly encompass music subcultures, whose musics are predominantly electronically synthesized. Such subcultures range from highly experimental electronic to techno to drum and bass. An equally broad usage of electronic music, which encompasses everything from arthouse to popular electronic music, will be employed.
3. The authors define this as including bhangra remix, post-bhangra, Asian electronic, Asian remix and bhangramuffin. Cornershop, although an indie band, was included within the term. Their later track, 'Brimful of Asha', became a dance club hit.
4. This trend of an Asian-influenced music growing popular in many segments of the Asian diaspora is not confined to bhangra or Asian electronic music. Rather, it seems to extend to other Asian-influenced musics such as Indo-Caribbean chutney (Ramnarine 1996).
5. Sawhney has headlined Jazz Festivals such as the Lemon Jelly Jazz Circus in Hampstead, London, 10 July 2005.
6. *Soundz of the Asian Underground* was a highly significant release, not only in terms of its musical innovations, but also due to its attribution of spawning the Asian electronic music scene in the UK, which was dubbed the 'Asian Underground', taking its name from Singh's album (Banerjea, 2000). Singh had a two-year residency at the Blue Note Club in London and subsequently ran 'Anokha' nights at venues such as Fabric in East London's fashionable Farringdon district. In 2001, he relaunched his Anokha night at 93 Feet East in Brick Lane, East London.
7. Philips used Talvin Singh's popular club anthem 'Jaani' in television advertisements.
8. Bhachu (2004) describes how, at the time, Cherie Blair began to wear Indian-inspired fashion, such as *salwar kameez* and saris.
9. This is not to say that the media as a whole engaged in a celebration of multiculturalism. Rather, some media representations – whether intentionally or inadvertently – helped fuel the New Labour-driven 'multiculturalist' wave in which, as Holohan (2006, p. 19) argues, 'the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence was repackaged as a leftover of a Britain divided by class and race'.
10. The Asian Dub Foundation Education community music project is the best-known example, and the programme in which that Boys from the East participated. However, other community music projects have been set up through local government funding in Tower Hamlets and elsewhere in the East End.



11. Examples include Nasha's 2005 'Earthquake Relief Fundraiser' and Samosafunk's 2006 'KIDSCO' charity event.
12. This is the name of a track by Ges-e and Osmani Soundz. The name is a play on Brick Lane, a well-known Bangladeshi area where many Asian electronic music events are held.
13. In many ways, this call and response is predictable. As the literature (e.g. Cohen, 1997, Vertovec and Cohen, 1999) illustrates, the diaspora often more closely associates with the typical, traditional or nostalgic elements of their homeland cultures.
14. This can be translated from Hindi to English as 'our music'. One of Britain's oldest bhangra outfits is named Apna Sangeet.
15. The Delhi-based MIDiVal Punditz, the Ahmedabad-based Bandish Projekt and Mumbai-based Kris are some examples of India-based Asian electronic musicians who have performed at the subculture's events in London.

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