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Drum’n’Dhol

British bhangra music and diasporic South Asian identity formation

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Abstract

British bhangra is a genre of British popular music fusing Punjabi lyrics and the beats of the Indian drum, the dhol, with black music genres and British pop sounds, producing an urban anthem and commentary about the lives of its British South Asian audiences. This article draws on qualitative research and interviews undertaken in Birmingham in the UK. It outlines how diasporic South Asian identities are made sense of through a conception of the way in which British bhangra music encapsulates an urban black British experience, how conservative lyrics of caste and gender in the music are negotiated by its listeners, and how some of the intergenerational formulations of British South Asian identities are performed at celebratory social gatherings.

Keywords

Birmingham, British Asians, popular music, urban identities

British bhangra can simply be described as developing out of the more traditional forms of the folk dances and music of the people of the Punjab, a large and diverse area stretching along the borders of India and Pakistan. As a music for people of South Asian origin in Britain, British bhangra has been extant since the postwar period with the arrival of migrant workers from South Asia and East Africa.

The term 'British bhangra' is widely used and accepted by singers, musicians, radio DJs and the British South Asian print and broadcast media. As a descriptive term it appropriately captures the music's fusion of traditional folk bhangra lyrics and beats with urban black British and pop sounds into a new and distinct genre of British bhangra dance and music. Interestingly, this genre is informing the composition and reception of bhangra music more generally throughout the South Asian diaspora in exciting ways; for example, it has been a benchmark for the production and development of bhangra music in North America.

Article
Despite British bhangra's presence in British culture and society for over 50 years, it remains a marginalized song and dance genre in mainstream British music. Only in the late 1990s, with the emergence of South Asian voices in British and western academia, have South Asian music genres begun to be discussed as serious sites of social and cultural inquiry, revealing the hitherto uncharted formation of diasporic South Asian identities in urban settings (Gopinath, 1995; Sharma et al., 1996).

This article engages with the debate engendered by these new studies of South Asian music and identity politics, and in the spirit of dialogue continues the discussion and analysis in an attempt to fill in some of the gaps left by them. In particular, this article offers a reading of British bhangra music as it encapsulates meanings of British South Asian identity formation. The article begins by surveying existing approaches to the study of British bhangra music and South Asian identities. It then goes on to outline the findings of a piece of qualitative research conducted in the city of Birmingham (UK) with six young British South Asians. In particular, the research investigated their engagements with British bhangra music and its role in their identity formation. Analysis is also made of some of the lyrics in British bhangra songs, thereby offering a textual reading of the music genre and its interplay with urban British South Asian lives.

**Academic commentaries of British bhangra: early and contemporary accounts**

Gerd Baumann and Sabita Banerji have individually and together written the first academic commentaries of British bhangra music (Banerji, 1988; Banerji and Baumann, 1990; Baumann, 1990, 1996: 156-7). Drawing loosely on the interdisciplinary concerns of popular music studies, they chart the emergence and rise of British bhangra from the 1960s up until the late 1980s by way of social commentary based upon informal interviews with British bhangra band members in 1980s Southall (west London). Their argument can be summarized as follows. The transition from traditional Punjabi bhangra music into British bhangra was taking shape in the mid-1980s. Traditional bhangra was developed in Britain in the late 1960s by South Asian musicians who began their music careers in Britain by singing hymns in Sikh gurdwaras and Hindu temples. These musicians formed amateur bhangra bands and performed in the traditional folk style of the Punjab at weddings and community celebrations. Around 1984, the emergence of bhangra beat, modern technology and urban black sounds – reggae, dub and soul, and the black sound system culture more generally – fused with traditional Punjabi lyrics was witnessed in Southall and in Birmingham. Bhangra beat simply evolved as the first and newly-emerging second generation of South Asian musicians began to experiment and improvise with technology. Moreover, they started British South Asian experience. They reached British South Asian communities of South Asian youth who had hit jazzfunk, hip-hop and British pop. Baumann argue that a British South Asian identity is paradoxical on the reinvention of forms of specific South Asians in Britain (see Dudrah, 1996).

Banerji and Baumann's customary music has been performed with some variations in Banerji (1995) and Mitchell (1996). This was an important challenge to the contributors to this work (Sharma et al., 1996), an important event for South Asians in Britain (see Dudrah, 1996).

Sanjay Sharma (1996), in particular, make easy readings of British bhangra identity by simply mapping out a case study. This argument can be seen as a fusion-based music and its Punjabi roots. Banerji and Baumann fail to comprehend the processes and cultural exchanges (Sharma, 1996). Banerji and Baumann also suggest that bhangra have articulated their sense of identity equally interesting ways. The music is influenced by sociocultural affiliations to the metropolitan Rap-based Asian Dub Foundation, termed under the banners of post-bhangra, or Asian Swami.

Clearly, British Asian youth groups invest in different music. Further, musical performances and the context of the performance, particularly at different British Asian life cycle points of comparison. Therefore, it is interesting to note how the examples of bhangra played at a British Asian gay dance nights for Asian gays, lesbians and more.
technology. Moreover, they started to locate their music in terms of a British South Asian experience. The popularity of bhangra beat soon reached British South Asian communities nationally and particularly the South Asian youth who had hitherto solely favoured reggae, soul, jazzfunk, hip-hop and British pop music. In this way, Banerji and Baumann argue that a British South Asian youth culture was constituted, predicated on the reinvention of folk bhangra that cut across internal cleavages of caste, ethnicity and religion.

Banerji and Baumann’s customary account of bhangra music has been rehearsed with some variations in Back (1996), Farrell (1997), Gillespie (1995) and Mitchell (1996). This version of the rise of bhangra has been challenged by the contributors to the Dis-orienting Rhythms book (Sharma et al., 1996), an important contribution to the cultural study of South Asians in Britain (see Dudrah, 1998a for a fuller review of this work).

Sanjay Sharma (1996), in particular, argues that Banerji and Baumann make easy readings of British bhangra in relation to South Asian cultural identity by simply mapping out a cultural authenticity and tradition argument. This argument can be summed up in the following way. Baumann and Banerji read British bhangra music as illustrating a homogeneous and unchanging identity in Britain rather than attempting to analyse some of the complex negotiations and translations that are occurring in British Asian cultural identity through the use of popular cultural forms such as British bhangra music. Thus, while it appears that an informed account of the historical emergence of bhangra as a fusion-based music and its Punjabi cultural roots has been presented, Banerji and Baumann fail to comprehend fully these complex musical processes and cultural exchanges (Sharma, 1996: 55).

Banerji and Baumann also suggest that bhangra music, in its specific derivations of a Punjabi folk dance, carries equal attraction to all British South Asian youth. This is inaccurate. It is important to point out other British South Asian musical ventures that, partly informed by British bhangra, have articulated their sense of ‘Asianness’ in different and equally interesting ways. The music of east London-based Joi Bangla, influenced by sociocultural affiliations with Bangladesh, and the cosmopolitan rap-based Asian Dub Foundation are two examples of artists termed under the banners of post-bhangra and Asian Kool or Anglo-Asian pop.

Clearly, British Asian youth groups have varied tastes and different investments in different music. Furthermore, the different range of musical performances and the contexts of their reception are never unitary, particularly at different British Asian gatherings. In this respect, the examples of bhangra played at a Punjabi wedding or at one of the dance nights for Asian gays, lesbians and bisexuals make interesting points of comparison. Therefore, it is important to warn against reductive...
readings of British bhangra as either simply operating in terms of cultural continuity and tradition or replicating a culturalist notion of Asian identity formation, disassociated from wider sociopolitical contexts and youth cultural movements. In the words of Sharma, it is more useful to view the emergence of bhangra as an *affirmative moment* in the formation of an Asian identity discourse in the early 1980s, a site for Asian youth culture acquiring a sense of identity and visibility in the public domain, and negotiating an ambivalent positionality in relation to a culturally hostile and exclusionary British nation. (Sharma, 1996: 39; emphasis in original)

More usefully, therefore, British bhangra and other post-bhangra genres are best seen as constituted of a musical dialogue with other black dance music genres that offer possibilities for the non-exhaustive identifications of ‘British and black’ and ‘Asian’ as politically available to Asian youth (1996: 40).

Unfortunately, Sharma analyses the lyrics of post-bhangra bands Asian Dub Foundation, Fun Da Mentals and Hustlers IIC. Like Banerji and Baumann, he provides no analysis of the lyrics of British bhangra tracks and what they reveal about British South Asian identities and their interplay with urban cultural politics. In fact, Sabita Banerji accurately cites the mid-1980s era of bhangra music as lacking any sort of political conviction. As she puts it: ‘But bhangra is not about politics, it is about having a good time in true, boisterous Punjabi fashion and the “message” to the white community is incidental’ (Banerji, 1988: 212). On the contrary, and as shall be demonstrated throughout this article, British bhangra is best understood as part of the urban cultural politics for British South Asians that partake as its audience.

In moving on from Banerji and Baumann and avoiding the pitfalls of understating the political importance of bhangra music, there is very little analysis of British bhangra lyrics in comparison to the analyses made of newer forms of post-bhangra music genres throughout *Dissorienting Rhythms* (Sharma et al., 1996). Also, while the theoretical readings offered by the contributors to the book offer frameworks for conceptualizing the relationship between Asian identifications and bhangra music that are more advanced than Baumann and Banerji offer (i.e. British bhangra as music primarily for British Asians away from simple formulations of cultural authenticity and identity), they lack a concise description of how British Asian identity formation occurs through British bhangra music. In this respect, my extended interviews proved useful in terms of how the respondents were able to understand and negotiate their British Asian identities through the music.

Gayatri Gopinath (1995), writing in the journal *Diaspora*, develops an analysis of British bhangra music from an advanced understanding of its complex relation to South Asian selected lyrics of the music and locates British bhangra music as the meanings of the diaspora and the.

Reading bhangra as a diasporic understanding of diaspora, in the hierarchical relation between diasporic national performance of cultures which multiple diasporas intersect national spaces that they are constructed (Gopinath, 1995: 504; emphasis in original).

Gopinath goes on to add that the genres within bhangra and its India, North America and elsewhere engagement about the nation state that inevitably imply exclusion. This state can be interrogated and challenged in the nation’s diasporic formulations (Gopinath) with fruitful implications for moving beyond the hierarchical relationship between the local and the global that posits the latter as, in some sense, disavowed, inauthentic, illegitimate or originary culture (1995: 317).

Gopinath also points out the potential for the cultural production of diasporic bhangra and their constructions of community as mothers, daughters, and the role for women as producers of the representation of diasporic texts and access to the means of production, both in the British bhangra music industry.

Whilst Gopinath’s criticisms are a feminist reading of British bhangra constructions of diaspora, she overdiagrammes and contradictions of listeners. Female audiences, as acts, as musical texts, do not simply take on the role for them, but these are open to negotiation, both in the patriarchy present in some of the lyrics. Of bhangra on dance floors opens up the identities of ‘male’ and ‘female’ categories and genders. This was certainly indicated in interviews shall demonstrate later. Similarly, su
complex relation to South Asian, British and black identities. Analysing selected lyrics of the music and its associated videos, she convincingly locates British bhangra music as a diasporic text revealing multifaceted meanings of the diaspora and the nation:

Reading bhangra as a diasporic text allows for a far more complicated understanding of diaspora, in that it demands a radical reworking of the hierarchical relation between diaspora and the nation. Bhangra, a transnational performance of culture and community, reveals the processes by which multiple diasporas intersect both with one another and with the national spaces that they are continuously negotiating and challenging. (Gopinath, 1995: 304; emphasis in original)

Gopinath goes on to add that the eclectic mixture of different music genres within bhangra and its dialogic movement between Britain, India, North America and elsewhere allow for the beginnings of a critical engagement about the nation state, away from monolithic constructions that inevitably imply exclusion. The exclusionary forms of the nation state can be interrogated and challenged through the composition of a nation’s diasporic formulations (1995: 313). This suggests critical and fruitful implications for moving away from simple formulations of the hierarchical relationship between the nation and diaspora, a hierarchy that posits the latter as, in some sense, ‘the bastard child of the nation – disavowed, inauthentic, illegitimate, an impoverished imitation of the originary culture’ (1995: 317).

Gopinath also points out the patriarchal and heterosexual structures of the cultural production of diaspora through some of the sexist lyrics in bhangra and their construction of women as the reproducers of community as mothers, daughters and wives (1995: 310–11). This limits the role for women as producers of diaspora within the discursive fields of representation of diasporic texts, but also in terms of their limited access to the means of production of diaspora. This is particularly true of the British bhangra music industry which is dominated by men.7

Whilst Gopinath’s criticisms are very pertinent at a general level of feminist reading of British bhangra, alerting one to the gendered constructions of diaspora, she overlooks the differing ways in which lyrical pleasures and contradictions are negotiated by its users and listeners. Female audiences, as active readers and listeners of bhangra musical texts, do not simply take on board the gendered roles assigned to them, but these are open to negotiation and contestation with the patriarchy present in some of the lyrics. For instance, the performance of bhangra on dance floors opens up spaces where the socially constructed identities of ‘male’ and ‘female’ can be recreated and mimicked across genders. This was certainly indicated by my female respondents, as I shall demonstrate later. Similarly, subversive pleasures along the lines of
sexuality can also be created from conservative lyrics, exemplified in the performance of bhangra songs and dances at Asian gay, lesbian and bisexual club nights.8

Undoubtedly, Sharma et al. (1996) and Gopinath (1995) advance our understandings of British bhangra. However, their respective arguments can also be described as being limited by the fact that there is a lack of focus on, or that there is an imbalance in the attention they give to, the social and aesthetic aspects of the music. What is being argued here is that, to elaborate the relationship between popular music and the formation of cultural identity more fully, both the social and aesthetic components of popular music need to be analysed together. This is a theoretical argument originally made by Simon Frith.9

Frith (1996a) argues for two types of value in popular music. First, music has a social value being a way of affirming personal identity, a form of communication and an expression and means of understanding lived experience. Second, music has an aesthetic value in its complexity of rhythms, tempos, melodic lines, vocal styles, instrumental use, body performance and so on. Frith argues for an appreciation of music and its meanings as socially constituted through the interplay of the two types of music value rather than privileging one over the other. Frith further contends that the two music values allow one to think about popular music listening and making as a way of telling stories about oneself and others, as a way of making sense of one’s own and others’ positions in the world at large. In this way, music becomes a metaphor for articulating cultural identities (Frith, 1996b). This idea is a useful analytical and conceptual tool with which to explore more fully the narratives and stories inherent in British bhangra music. Thus, relying solely on either the social or the aesthetic aspect of popular music will produce only partial results, as can be seen in the cases of Sharma et al. (1996) and Gopinath (1995). More challenging is to offer an account of popular music and cultural identity that includes both aspects.

Bearing the above arguments in mind and using my extended interview responses, let us consider the relationships between British bhangra music and diasporic South Asian identity formation in a little more detail (see Note 5). In particular, and as a result of themes emerging out of the interviews, I want to pay attention to the way in which identities are made sense of through the dynamic urban British South Asian experience expressed in bhangra music. I also wish to focus on the ways that conservative gender and caste lyricization of the music is negotiated by its listeners and how some of the intergenerational formulations of British South Asian identities are performed at celebratory social gatherings.

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British bhangra and urban experiences

British bhangra music is part and parcel of British cities implicated in wider cultural expressions that contribute to the making of place and locality. British bhangra itself over the past 30 years by its embrace of the politics of urban British South Asian metropoles, alongside other black British and cultural expressions that illustrate the complex of the different music styles, lyrics and dance, provides a dynamic experience for young South Asians. The eclectic mix was read as inherent and accepted by my respondents as part of their everyday experience of the music.

Reshma: I like the way the dhol and the tabla sound

Manjit: The way the dhol works in the songs, but also it’s mixed together. You can relate to all of them.

Negget: I like the beat, the music. For me, I see people rapping in Asian music, like a more western type music genre. We’re changing the style of music and also the music.

Reshma’s and Manjit’s coupling of the dhol, with its heavy bass and percussion sounds and Negget’s description of black and western music styles and Negget’s description of the dhol signifies an understanding of the kind of music that captures the experience of urban Britain fuse together the local and the global, the Asian and the Western.

More interestingly, the upbeat contemporary British bhangra, produced with studio guitars and percussion sounds, defies a simple and straightforward description, and other percussion instruments. Percussionally and digitally, are often sampled, recombined, and performed simultaneously at live performances to present a particular kind of bhangra music, that is distinct from the early bhangra albums of Bally Sagoo and
conservative lyrics, exemplified in the 1990s at Asian gay, lesbian and (1996) and Gopinath (1995) advance our understanding of this. However, their respective arguments were introduced by the fact that there is a lack of awareness in the attention they give to, the cultural significance of music. What is being argued here is that the interplay between popular music and the cultural world is more fully, both the social and aesthetic dimensions of music need to be analysed together. This is a view defended by Simon Frith. The ways of value in popular music. First, the need to affirming personal identity, a sense of connection and means of understanding one’s own world. As an aesthetic value in its complexity, popular music can offer a rich range of experiences for an appreciation of music and its role in the interplay of the two types of experiences. Frith further argues that one can think about popular music as a way of telling stories about oneself and one’s own and others’ positions in the world. This idea is a useful analytical and exploratory tool for thinking about music. Thus, relying solely on either aspect of popular music will produce only limited interpretations of the cases of Sharma et al. (1996) and (1997) is to offer an account of popular music and to include both aspects.

In mind and using my extended interpretations between British bhangra music and its black and western music capture not only the ‘togetherness’ of how the music works as a mix, but also how identity is thought of and imagined as a way of experiencing the music as a whole, composed of different styles and genres. The dhol signifies an ‘Asian’ sound, and the baselines connoting urban Britain fuse together to articulate a fluid British South Asian music and identity.

More interestingly, the upbeat tempo characteristic of much contemporary British bhangra, produced by the vigorous interplay of percussion sounds, defies a simple and neat distinction between the dhol and other percussion instruments. Percussion sounds, produced instrumentally and digitally, are often sampled together and are played simultaneously at live performances to produce a deep bass effect. This is particularly true of a number of bhangra remixes, as exemplified in the early bhangra albums of Bally Sagoo and also in other British bhangra music.
music with jungle drum and bass elements. The music of Birmingham-based Punjabi MC is a fitting example of the latter fusion styles. In a moment of technical wizardry and musical innovation, the assignment of musical instruments and sounds into easily defined national boundaries is impossible as one sound merges with and becomes the other. Moreover, both work in relation to each other because of the similar sound qualities and feelings of ‘depth’ each produces. Suky Sohal, musician from the group Achanak, also makes a related point about the similarities in bhangra and reggae rhythms that help to explain how they are fused and work together so easily: ‘Reggae and bhangra use similar grooves and beat patterns. What you could call syncopation, a sort of dotted rhythm. You can hear one in the other, which is why they work so well together.’

The articulation of identity through a fusion-based music, therefore, opens up possibilities wherein people are able to identify in a number of ways and with a number of identifications from Asian, black and British that aren’t exclusively one of these identities, but a collective articulation of all three. As Negget speculates about the hybrid musical scores and eclecticism of urban black lives:

**RKD:** Would you say that the mixing you describe in the music was also going on in wider society around you?

**Negget:** It could in a way. The clothes people are wearing, people mixing in groups. These days you can see black people listening to jungle, reggae, etc., but if it’s all mixed and Asian people can do that as well, other people will probably listen to some Asian music as well. My black friends have asked me about bhangra music when I have it on.

Inner city areas with black social groups are comprised of layers of multitemporal sounds, images and feelings. These layers jostle and blend with each other to produce a unique postcolonial experience of the city which is both indicative of the residents that dwell in the urban metropolis as multiple citizens and of how they make sense of each other through the repertoire of sounds, images and feelings. Each community displays a system of signs and ensuing meanings (music, tastes, aromas, politics, local economies, the interaction of different people and so forth) as a cut and mix from around the world. These representations allow for the symbolic construction of distinctive communities and communities alike each other working to renew versions of Britain on their own terms and in the context of, at times, a racist nation. If bhangra and other black music share similar rhythms and beat patterns that are open to be read and appreciated by its musicians and listeners, then equally an uncontainable discursive space exists in which identities are open to be imagined and reimagined. This helps to set up opportunities for dialogic exchanges and appreciation between different social and cultural groups about their relationships and identifications with music.

**RKD:** What are some of the things you think about music?

**Negget:** They like the songs quite a lot. They ask us what this means, what’s going on and that. So, it’s not just the Asian communities, it’s different communities to our culture.

The relationship between music and identity that can be thought of as each illuminating continually played and replayed in the way we imagine about ourselves imaginatively. This is what I have heard a favourite track over and over again. What we hear and how we make sense of it is different. This view is further complicated by what is played and performed, or when we listen to music. What possibilities for music are there?

However, British bhangra music does blend instruments interwoven with technologic music making. Central to the popularisation that further reveals facets of the poli/heterogeneity in urban British South Asian life is a preference for the lyrics in bhangra music, and enjoyment of the music.

**Reshmo:** I like the voice and the lyrics.

**Negget:** I understand the words. I like that together.

**Attif:** I like the beats and some of the lyrics.

Like almost any other popular music, British bhangra music is a diverse form of music. Its diversity of themes about life in general and notions of love between a young couple, celebrating a wedding, to songs about modernification through playful lyrics about drinking at modern Punjabi folk music, British bhajans and affiliations with the Punjab as ‘home’ on discerning tracks, criticisms are often within South Asian cultures and British life. Together, the Punjabi-based band Golden Star, from their 1993 album, Direct Attack on the Dowry System in A.
elements. The music of Birmingham, an ample of the latter fusion styles. In a musical innovation, the assignment of "Rhythms into easily defined nation state sound merges with and becomes the relation to each other because of the ods of 'depth' each produces. Suky Sohal, also makes a related point about the use of rhythms that help to explain how so easily: 'Reggae and bhangra use What you could call syncopation, a sort of one in the other, which is why they work tion of identity through a fusion-based abilities wherein people are able to it with a number of identifications from n't exclusively one of these identities, l three. As Negget speculates about the ism of urban black lives:

- mixing you describe in the music was also his around you?
- lothes people are wearing, people mixing in a can see black people listening to jungle, mixed and Asian people can do that as well, only listen to some Asian music as well. My me about bhangra music when I have it on.

Social groups are comprised of layers of feelings.11 These layers jostle and blend ique postcolonial experience of the city e residents that dwell in the urban id of how they make sense of each other , images and feelings. Each community using meanings (music, tastes, aromas, fraction of different people and so forth) e world. These representations allow for distinctive communities and communities of versions of Britain on their own terms racist nation. If bhangra and other black I beat patterns that are open to be read ns and listeners, than equally an un- s in which identities are open to be helps to set up opportunities for dialogic een different social and cultural groupsifications with music.

RKD: What are some of the things your black friends ask about the music?

Negget: They like the songs quite a bit, especially Apache Indian's stuff. They ask us what this means and that means, and how you pronounce this and that. So, it's had quite a big effect on more than just the Asian communities. It's a sort of common ground for two different communities to come together and enjoy music and culture.

The relationship between music and identity formation, therefore, is one that can be thought of as each illuminating the other, as a fluid melody continually played and replayed in the telling and retelling of stories about ourselves imaginatively. This is particularly the case each time we hear a favourite track over and over again, but the creative possibilities in what we hear and how we make sense of it, and ourselves, are never identical. This view is further complicated when we hear live music being played and performed, or when we listen to a remixed version of a piece of music. What possibilities for music and identity formation open up here?

However, British bhangra music does not solely consist of musical instruments interwoven with technological developments in modern music making. Central to the popularity of British bhangra are the lyrics that further reveal facets of the political meanings and pleasures inherent in urban British South Asian lives. My respondents clearly stated a preference for the lyrics in bhangra songs as part of their appreciation and enjoyment of the music.12

Reshma: I like the voice and the lyrics.

Negget: I understand the words. I like the beat, the music. How it all goes together.

Attif: I like the beats and some of the words I can understand.

Like almost any other popular music, British bhangra also encapsulates a diversity of themes about life in general. These range from unrequited notions of love between a young couple in their mid-teens, families celebrating a wedding, to songs about male friendship and bonding often through playful lyrics about drinking alcohol. More specifically, as a modern Punjabi folk music, British bhangra lyrics also display diasporic affiliations with the Punjab as 'homeland'. In some of the more discerning tracks, criticisms are often aimed at some of the injustices within South Asian cultures and British lives. For example, the song Is Daaj Noon Kardeo Bandh (Stop the Dowry System) by the Birmingham-based band Golden Star, from their 1987 album I Love Golden Star, is a direct attack on the dowry system in Asian marriages. The song calls on
youth to become agents of radical social change in the choices they make related to the more conservative rites and rituals of arranged marriages. What follows, therefore, is an example of some of the meanings in lyrics of selected British bhangra tracks. Rather than offer analysis of the musical development of different bands and their lyrical meanings, I want to illustrate a sample of politicized lyrics intertwined with urban British South Asian lives which hitherto have not been examined in any detail in the aforementioned academic commentaries of British bhangra.

Contrary to Banerji's formulation of British bhangra as simply 'boisterous' fun and its message to white Britain as 'incidental' (Banerji, 1988: 212), bhangra is better understood as immersed explicitly in being heard and taken seriously in the cultural and mainstream politics of urban Britain. Even if Banerji intended to imply that 1980s bhangra tracks were bereft of much mainstream political content, this view ignores the notion of announcing oneself as here and now through popular cultural expressions. British bhangra has been, and is, part of diasporic struggles over belonging in a British nation that is often constructed around white Englishness, which in turn marginalizes minority and especially black groups. Babes and Manjit, two of the respondents, aptly capture the relationship between bhangra music and its possibilities of articulating with and creating meanings from British South Asian lives:

Babes: A lot of social aspects are picked from the music and lyrics.

RKD: What kinds of aspects?

Babes: Like living life in general in Britain.

Manjit: Some of the music you just dance to, but then there are those songs with stuff about Soho Road, and Punjab and other things. You can dance to those songs as well or just listen to them but they have meaning.

Different British bhangra bands in equally different ways have articulated an engagement with the struggles and pleasures of urban South Asian Britain. This was evident in the track Dhol Tax by the Birmingham-based band Achanak from their 1990 album panACHHE. This was a direct attack on the former ruling Conservative Party and its then leader and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher for introducing the infamous Community Charge during the late 1980s. The charge was compulsory for each member of the British general public over 18 years of age for the use and provision of community services. In one of the many displays of opposition to the community charge, it became popularly known as the 'poll tax', and the song's title is clearly a play on this phrase. The song begins with a brief dialogue sketch between two band members arriving at Heathrow Airport, fronted by a pompous customs official:

Two band members: Oo! Heathrow.

Customs official: Excuse me sir but we colour your bags.

Band member 1: Oi don’t be cheeky.

Band member 2: Sohan Singh who?

Band member 1: We can’t live without paying the tax.

Band member 2: But the Poll Tax is too much.

Band member 1: What we’ll do is the Poll Tax.

Band member 2: Yes. Good idea.

The airport is an interesting site of diaspora, encompassing travel and migration, birthplace and origin and questions of citizenship. The airport is also an apparatus of the 'outsiders' according to citizenship, race, and class. Upon arrival in London, the band members were often ignored by the airport officials, or 'foreignness' by the airport officials was deemed 'colourful'. Over a musical instrument illustrates procedures and the exoticization of South Asian cultures. The airport answers back with a vibrant and radical soundscape and those who seek to use it as an arena of political agendas.

Dhol tax hon dehna lokho
Poll tax nahi dehna wai [Chorus x 3]
[Pay the Dhol Tax people
Don’t pay the Poll Tax]
There is no hassle with the Dhol Tax
You will really feel the effects of the Poll Tax
That is why we sing this song
[Chorus]
Thatcher has done a bad deed
She has created more problems for every
between two band members arriving at Heathrow Airport who are confronted by a pompous customs officer:

Two band members: OOh Heathrow Airport.

Customs official: Excuse me sir but you’ll have to pay a small duty on that colourful barrel of yours.

Band member 1: Oi don’t be cheeky dats my dhol you know.

Band member 2: Sohan Singh what shall we do now?

Band member 1: We can’t live without our dhol so I guess we’ll have to pay the tax.

Band member 2: But the Poll Tax has already killed us man. It’s already too much.

Band member 1: What we’ll do is pay the Dhol Tax but we won’t pay the Poll Tax.

Band member 2: Yes. Good idea.

The airport is an interesting site of connection and movement within the diaspora, encompassing travel and contemplation between the country of birthplace and origin and questions of citizenship and identity. However, the airport is also an apparatus of the state that classifies ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ according to citizenship, with an emphasis on cultural traits. Upon arrival in London, the band members are rudely reminded of their ‘foreignness’ by the airport official referring to their importation of the ‘colourful’ South Asian drum, the dhol. The imposition of state authority over a musical instrument illustrates the inequalities of immigration procedures and the exoticization of South Asian lives in Britain. The band answers back with a vibrant and radical message denouncing the poll tax and those who seek to use it as an ideological tool to serve their own political agendas.

Dhol tax hon dehna loko
Poll tax nahiin dehna wai [Chorus x 3]
[Pay the Dhol Tax people
Don’t pay the Poll Tax]

There is no hassle with the Dhol Tax
You will really feel the effects of the Poll Tax
That is why we sing this song
[Chorus]

Thatcher has done a bad deed
She has created more problems for everyone

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'Poll Tax is the simple solution' [Thatcher voice impersonation]
We have bills to pay
We can't sleep at night with worry
That is why we sing this song

[Chorus]
When we go shopping on Soho Road
We have to watch our purse strings
'We are concerned with your needs' [Thatcher voice impersonation]
Those with big and full houses
How would they understand our plight?
That is why we sing this song

[Chorus]
We get little wages from work
What other pains of the heart shall we tell you?
'Every individual must pay' [Thatcher voice impersonation]
Thatcher should be shot
Why doesn't she hear our pleas?
That is why we sing this song

[Chorus]
'I'm the voice of my country' [x2, Thatcher voice impersonation]
'It's the Queen here [Queen Elizabeth II voice impersonation]
Now listen Margaret it's not your country
So just sod off or I'll set the Corgis on you.' (Author's translation from the original Punjabi. Reprinted with kind permission.)

The song, through its combination of humorous and satirical lyrics with energetic dhol playing and urgent synthesizers, articulated the message to South Asian communities that they were one of the hardest hit groups by this new tax and that they should refuse to pay. The refusal to pay was a widespread strategy adopted by many groups on the Left. The song offered an alternative tax of the dhol – the 'dhol tax' – that was free by way of listening to the sound of the incessant drum beat. This playful reference to the dhol tax is not accidental, but explicitly refers to the masculinist and social inequalities of British society and the effects of such acts in marginalizing South Asian and other minority Britons. Thus, the dhol becomes a signifier of calling for collective strength and unity in which South Asian pleasures, pains and politics take shape in reaction to a hostile and conservative British experience.

While arguing that British bhangra music has a political dimension, I do not wish to overstate the case as bhangra is heard in many different contexts and marks cultural space in many different ways. For example, it is played at daytime discos, live gigs and at the familial setting of South Asian weddings and parties. Bhangra can also be characterized as the male counterpart to the traditional women's songs and dance genre, ghiglia (see Kaur and Kalra, 1996: 228 for an outline of ghiglia). The point is to avoid creating single grand narratives of multiple readings and meanings that grasping social formations and the politics. However, in each of the after the music is taking shape and being translated in the South Asian experience. Hence, the British music, fused with elements of other popular emergence of British bhangra. This has resulted in a unique fusion that is produced and performed in the South Asia as well as in the Indian subcontinent itself.

For example, the use of 'Soho Road' (and other black British shops, restaurants, Birmingham) in the lyrics of country and R&B tracks, including in the Dhol Tax, has had a significant impact on the songs of the Indo-Canadian bhangra. The British-born singer is indicating and reusing the area of large South Asian and black cultural, social, cultural and political space made up of British Asians and other minority groups. This is a cultural centre despite the difficulties and wealth and opportunities experienced by the immensely popular reference that is to be found in the songs.

In another example, the hugely popular song 'Soho Road' by the Birmingham-based band describes a love story in which two lovers are separated and then attempt to find each other. The song is a journey. Among the places the couple visits are Bradford, Coventry, Derby, London and these areas are inscribed by their South Asian movements. Invoking Soho Road in the culturally politicized bhangra music brings British South Asians as contributing to the
contemporary political and urban cultural landscape. It becomes one defining and identifiable point of the South Asian experience. Concepts such as connecting points of the South Asian community and different continents. Music and identity are understood and complicated through an understanding of their invocation of global cultural geopolitical, and an eclectic repertoire of international music that is able to use and make meaning from the process of self-realization that is localized, the frame of South Asian reference in mind.
point is to avoid creating single grand narratives around music at the cost of multiple readings and meanings that allow for exciting possibilities in grasping social formations and their interplay with urban cultural politics. However, in each of the aforementioned contexts, a genre of music is taking shape and being transformed in the light of a British South Asian experience. Hence, the innovative change of a Punjabi folk music, fused with elements of other popular music cultures, results in the emergence of British bhangra. These musical transformations have resulted in a unique fusion that is informing the way the music is produced and performed in the South Asian diaspora the world over, as well as in the Indian subcontinent itself.

For example, the use of 'Soho Road' (a popular street of South Asian and other black British shops, restaurants and businesses in Handsworth, Birmingham) in the lyrics of countless numbers of British bhangra tracks, including in the Dhol Tax, has also been articulated in the lyrics of the songs of the Indo-Canadian bhangra singer Jazzy B. The Canadian born singer is indicating and reusing the name of a British street in an area of large South Asian and black settlement as an easily identifiable social, cultural and political space made and developed by British South Asians and other minority groups. This street is recognizably thriving as a cultural centre despite the difficulties of racisms and the inequalities of wealth and opportunities experienced by its residents. It has become an immensely popular reference that is recycled in the lyrics of bhangra songs.

In another example, the hugely popular song Soho Road Uteh (On Soho Road) by the Birmingham band Apna Sangeet (Our Music) describes a love story in which two lovers meet in India, become separated and then attempt to find each other through a love quest-cum-song as journey. Among the places travelled and searched, we hear of Bradford, Coventry, Derby, London and Soho Road. Interestingly, all these areas are inscribed by their South Asian settlements as politicized movements. Invoking Soho Road in the transnational context of a culturally politicized bhangra music therefore affirms the identity of British South Asians as contributing to and developing the meaning of contemporary political and urban culture in the West. Soho Road becomes one defining and identifiable landscape in which urban British South Asian experiences are collated and articulated alongside other connecting points of the South Asian diaspora, spanning several cities in different continents. Music and identity formation, therefore, is further complicated through an understanding of the importance of lyrics and their invocation of global cultural geographies. Lyrics, together with an eclectic repertoire of international musical styles, open up possibilities in which listeners are able to use and make sense of British bhangra in a process of self-realization that is locally constituted, but with a global frame of South Asian reference in mind. As the respondent Manjit put it:
Manjit: The lyrics also help you to think about India, the Punjab and that. I was in India last year and when I'm listening to some of the music now it reminds me of certain places I visited, or when I was with my relatives. Even food mentioned in the lyrics you can relate to.

RKD: How do those memories of India relate to you being British?

Manjit: I know I'm not really from India as I'm born in England but it [India] has a special place in my mind because of my roots and family, and the fact that I've been there. So it's part of me being British too.

Listening to British bhangra music opens up reflexive moments wherein listeners are able to 'open up' and revisit a range of experiences from their life histories. British South Asian listeners, as in the example of Manjit, are able to formulate their identity as a process consisting of, among other things: the articulation of memory; generational histories; diasporic travel; affiliations with country of origin; affectionate pleasures of time spent with relatives; and the aroma of different food. In this way, bhangra music opens up dialogic moments for internal reflection that are unique according to individual life experiences. These dialogic moments are also collective in that other British South Asians are able to internalize similar life experiences, but not necessarily in identical ways. Nonetheless, it is the reflexive act of being able to experience and revisit one's life histories, as evoked through transnational music and lyrics, that generates an understanding of British bhangra as entwined with urban British experiences and at the same time interconnected with global cultural identity formation as well.

However, not all lyrics in British bhangra are as politically progressive or as equally appreciated by all its listeners. For instance, issues of caste and gender are sometimes ominously played out through the music. These were interpreted by the respondents in a number of ways.

**Caste and gender lyrics in British bhangra**

The British bhangra music industry is dominated by men. This means that some lyrics offer women limited representations as unashamed objects of pleasure in an unapologetic heterosexual fashion (see Gopinath, 1995: 510–11; Kaur and Kalra, 1996: 228). Also, caste-specific overtones continue to be heard, privileging the jat (hierarchical landowning class of the Punjab) as primary producer and consumer of the music. The jat, and his female counterpart the jati, are portrayed through respectively stereotypical notions of male strength articulated with farming skills and youthful prowess and a feminine beauty that is 'sharp' in looks and allegedly unique to this caste. Interestingly, there is no reference to the social and economic exploitation of lower castes in terms of labour exploitation.

The use of caste and gender is recognized by the respondents, but also the pleasurable experience of the music and lyrics of the narrow versions of cultural entailed:

Manjit: In some of the songs you have problems, especially the jat. It's as if the Punjab. It can kind of go on, you know, off the Punjab. It can kind of go wrong. I mean for a lot of people. You have to be aware of that. But now and then you still have to see them. It's important. It's not just about caste and shit and being a jat. It can be ammunition for the others.

RKD: Do you have problems with some of the songs which men sing about women?

Reshma: Some of the stuff they are singing, you know, I like the songs. I listen to them on my own so I don’t like them, I like them or I don't do something so I'm not thinking. I'm careful what I listen to sometimes, but it's not always about the lyrics. She's saying, 'I don’t like them, they're all bhangra.' But then at parties, they are saying as long as you are enjoying the music or the beat. Then you listen to the same songs that she might not like.

The different contexts in which bhangra is played, of range from personal listening space to dance at celebratory functions such as weddings, festivals and so forth. The different identities entitled, then, will initiate a different set of responses to the music. The respondents make sense of themselves and their experiences of the music and the lyrics by contextualizing them within the cultural fluid interplay of identities, music and dance at parties where gender is mingled in a performance of collective pleasure.
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The use of caste and gendered lyrics in problematic ways was recognized by the respondents, but these neither diminished their pleasurable experience of the music, nor cramped their creative rebus of the narrow versions of cultural identities that some of the words entailed:

Manjit: In some of the songs you get the higher castes chatted about, especially the jat. It's as if the jats only listen to bhangra or live in the Punjab. It can kind of isolate the other castes. Don't get me wrong, I mean for a lot of young people caste doesn't really matter, but now and then you still get some people, young and old, who are into caste and shit and when those kind of songs are played it can be ammunition for them.

RKD: Do you have problems with listening to some bhangra tracks in which men sing about women in a certain way?

Reshma: Some of the stuff they are saying are bad towards girls, but still, you know, I like the songs. I don't really have a problem as I can listen to them on my own as background music when I'm working or doing something so I'm more interested in the music. But I'd be careful what I listen to in front of my mum, because she sometimes objects. She'd say 'Do you know what that means? I don't like it.' But then at parties sometimes you don't care what the lyrics are saying as long as you are having a good time and enjoying the music or the beat. Even then my mum will dance to the same songs that she might have objected to. Everyone joins in.

The different contexts in which bhangra songs and lyrics are made sense of range from personal listening spaces to collective instances of song and dance at celebratory functions such as births, engagements, weddings and so forth. The different identities engendered in each of these spaces initiate a different set of responses to the lyrics and music in which the respondents make sense of themselves. The conservative positioning that some of the lyrics entail does not necessarily lead to a complete imposition on one's sense of self, but can be reworked through the combination of lyrics and music. Often, as suggested by Reshma, precedence can be given to the music over the lyrics in which the fluidity of the sound and beat can outplay the inherent conservative status quo of the lyrics' meaning. The fluid interplay of identities, music and lyrics was further opened up on the dance floor at parties where genders, generations, kith and kin all mingled in a performance of collective selves.

RKD: What happens at the parties, could you say a bit more about that?
Reshma: Most of our cousins are there, and we all dance together as a family. Occasionally, parents dance in the one corner and the young people dance in another corner. At some parties, the middle-aged women will dance together ‘cos they might feel we’re going too fast for them so they’ll be dancing slow, and our crowd will be just freaking out, going too fast for ‘em [laughs]. But then we all get together and dance as families and cousins. Sometimes we make fun of each other, and depending on who you’re dancing with we can dance in different ways.

RKD: How do you mean dance in different ways?

Reshma: You know like teasing one another, messing around, to dancing together and singing songs with each other, stuff like that.

The dance floor is an outlet for the performance and recreation of social selves. British bhangra acts as a conduit through which individual and group identities are signalled and the dance floor becomes a literal and metaphorlic space in which these identities are actualized. The performance of identities is not always a straightforward replica of the social self, but a mobile exchange of bodily movements, looks, gestures, feelings and personal constructions of social space. The cost of conservative or discriminatory lyrics of caste or gender can be suspended or overcome through the force of the music as a social cement that brings together different cultural experiences and social constituencies of personal leisure, emotional filters, parodies, genders, relationships and different generations all mixed together on the dance floor.

While containing conservative streaks in some of its songs, British bhangra is also marked by its flexibility and ability to tap into cultures-in-the-making across a range of identities. For instance, the remixing of older tracks with urban sounds and other musical genres, repackage for a more contemporary and diverse audience, is testament to the music’s potential for bringing about intergenerational dialogue and communication:

Reshma: Some of the songs they have brought back and remixed. Like my parents use to listen to an old Bindrakhia [name of an artist from India] track without the bass, whereas they have brought it back remixed for us. My mum said ‘Oh that’s come back, I used to listen to that’. The song was in a Punjabi film which she’d seen and then we started talking about that film and when she was a young girl.

RKD: You said you liked Bally Sagoo’s bhangra remixes, and especially his Bollywood Flashback album. What do you think about all that mixing he does bringing together Indian film music, bhangra beats, rapping and so on?

Nagde: I think that it’s really good. The older generation used to laugh at it. I don’t know if they believe he’s bringing back our part in the way that we would like it, all those years ago. We might.

Evidently, an analysis of the music and its relationship with British society will reveal the social construction of cultural identities and its openness to fluid possibilities (identity can simultaneously identify with Asian, black and the music). Given the problems of the cultural and gender, perhaps asking for more consciousness is not too much. As the respondent Rita surmised, women in the bhangra fandom will be keeping vigilant ears as they will continue to dance the rhythms of the dhol, tabla and bhangra. Women and musicians will have to deal with the contradictory pleasures if they are to participate with some of their more discerning audiences.

Summary

This article has discussed existing academic engagement with British bhangra music and in particular more recent attempts to construct South Asian identities with urban black culture. It is a qualitative analysis of actual voices in the British bhangra music industry in Birmingham.

Admittedly, the role of British bhangra music in constructing and remaking itself has not been covered in this article. The development and sustenance of the British bhangra music industry has yet to be fully charted and made the subject of creative and expressive attention. (see Dudrah, 1998b, 2001: Ch. 4)
Negget: I think that it's really good mixing old songs with new beats. The older generation used to listen to those songs when they first came out. I don't know if they like it or not, but we certainly do. I think he's bringing back our parents' culture but in a different way, in a way that we would like it. It's obviously changed from what it was all those years ago. We might not have liked it the way it was then.

Evidently, an analysis of the musical and lyrical meanings in bhangra music and its relationship with British South Asian identity formation reveals the social construction of cultural identities as conservative (i.e., the narrow focus on caste and gender present in some lyrics), as well as its openness to fluid possibilities (i.e., audiences being able to simultaneously identify with Asian, black and British identifications through the music). Given the problems of the limited representations of caste and gender, perhaps asking for more ingenious and critical lyrics is not too much. As the respondent Rita summed up: 'It would be good if they could sing more about women in better ways.' Assuredly, many bhangra fans will be keeping vigilant ears as they continue to revel in the music and dance to the rhythms of the dhol. In this way, British bhangra artists and musicians will have to deal with some of the music's more contradictory pleasures if they are to maintain a critical engagement with some of their more discerning audiences.

**Summary**

This article has discussed existing academic accounts of British bhangra music and in particular more recent studies that have linked diasporic South Asian identities with urban black cultural politics. It has provided a qualitative analysis of actual voices in terms of their listening to and engagement with British bhangra music. These have been offered not as a corrective to theoretically informed commentaries, but as an addition in order to open up further the realm of cultural and social inquiry relating to diasporic texts and identities. In particular, an attempt has been made to elaborate theoretical arguments about music as a metaphor for articulating cultural identities as being grounded in an analysis of both the social and aesthetic components of popular music.

Admittedly, the role of British bhangra artists and producers themselves has not been covered in this article. Their contributions to the development and sustenance of the British bhangra cultural industry remain to be fully charted and made sense of in terms of cultural creativity and expression — albeit on the margins of mainstream popular music (see Dudrah, 1998b, 2001: Ch. 4 for an account of the British bhangra music industry in Birmingham).

Taken together, the meanings produced by the listening and dancing to British bhangra music illustrate a (re)constitution of British South...
Asian identities in urban black Britain. British bhangra has been illustrated as a fusion-based music incorporating other black music genres and western pop with Punjabi folk beats and lyrics. In this way, British bhangra can be read as an instance of identity formation for British South Asians that is not in opposition to notions of being black and British. In fact, part of the process of British South Asian identity formation vis-à-vis British bhangra music includes a cultural politics towards some of the more conservative and exclusionary acts of white British culture and society. Listening and dancing to music are ways of making sense of oneself, narrating oneself internally to other social group members and to the world at large. Diasporic South Asians are making meaning from and adding to bhangra music. In doing so, they are contributing to the ebb and flow of their cultural identities and are announcing their presence through the audible soundscapes of Britain’s major cities and beyond.

Notes
1. The title of this article, drum ‘n’ dhol, is taken from the Wolverhampton-based British bhangra band Azaad’s 1989 album of the same name.
2. For a general and very descriptive account of the different styles and forms of folk dances of the Punjab, see Duggal (1980).
3. Often, the single word ‘bhangra’ is simply used, but this is almost always as a shorthand for, or synonymous with, the genre of British bhangra music.
4. Extended interviews were conducted as part of doctoral thesis research (see Dudrah, 2001). In total, 23 extended interviews were conducted with 14–26-year-old South Asians. The six individual interviews used in this article were conducted during December 1997 and February 1998. The respondents, under pseudonyms of their own choice, were:
   - Babs: 17-year-old female, A-level student
   - Manjit: 22-year-old male, bank clerk
   - Reshmo: 17-year-old female, A-level student
   - Neggett: 16-year-old female, GCSE student
   - Attif: 15-year-old male, GCSE student
   - Rita: 24-year-old female, crime bureau officer.
5. For a more detailed discussion and examples of the different styles of music termed under the label post-bhangra, see Huq (1994, 1996) and Sharma (1996: 41).
6. Beyond the analysis of this article, there are sections of British Asian youth that do not, or claim not to, listen to British bhangra as part of their collection of popular music. How might the cultural identities of these British Asian youth be accounted for?
7. However, a study remains to be undertaken of the history and role of women artists in the British bhangra music industry. This could include an examination of how they themselves have contributed to heteronormative narratives and representations, as well as challenged the patriarchal nature of the music and its industry. Women artists have been present since the inception and development of bhangra music, from its folk derivations in the Punjab to its present status as a global genre.
8. See, for example, Gilbert and Pearson (1997) for an introduction and fuller discussion of the social history of western dance music.
10. Extract from interview conducted by Sita, daughter of a bhangra player and band member of Birmingham-based group.
11. For accounts of inner city urban forms of life, see Ingham and Lassman (1993) and Dudrah (2001). On the inner city representation of black people in it, see.
12. It is important to point out here that the term bhangra music simply means ‘the dance’, though in recent years it has become primarily in Punjab, a regional language and is used in both India and Pakistan. While listeners and learners of bhangra music can be British Asians with affiliations to the local community, many are second, third and fourth generation.(
13. Achanak literally translates as ‘suddenly’ or ‘sleept’ in the Punjabi language.
14. However, there is a study that has been undertaken of the history and role of women artists in the British bhangra music industry. This could include an examination of how they themselves have contributed to heteronormative narratives and representations, as well as challenged the patriarchal nature of the music and its industry. Women artists have been present since the inception and development of bhangra music, from its folk derivations in the Punjab to its present status as a global genre. The female singers and sisters of Sultans were immensely popular folk singer who have toured Britain on a number of occasions. Their powerful voice and folk sonnets about the predicament of women in heteronormative society were nothing but the source of heartache. The postwar period included Jagmohan Kaur, often criticized family structures and their sex roles, and the same time they are also demanding more rights. Their songs remain an inspiration and provide material for numerous creative works and development of women’s involvement in the culture. See for example, Gilbert and Pearson (1997) for an introduction and fuller discussion of the social history of western dance music. See Pickering and Negus (1998) for a discussion of Frith’s works. Extract from interview conducted by Sita, daughter of a bhangra player and band member of Birmingham-based group. For accounts of inner city urban forms of life, see Ingham and Lassman (1993) and Dudrah (2001). On the inner city representation of black people in it, see. It is important to point out here that the term bhangra music simply means ‘the dance’, though in recent years it has become increasingly popular in the UK, particularly in the Cockney style. Listeners and learners of bhangra music can be British Asians with affiliations to the local community, many are second, third and fourth generation. 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the Punjab to its present status as an urban anthem in Britain. For instance,
the female singers and sisters Surinder and Prakash Kaur from north India
were immensely popular folk singers during the 1950s and 1960s, and even
toured Britain on a number of occasions performing stage shows. With their
powerful voice tones and folk sonnets, they often questioned the
predicament of women in heterosexual love relationships in which men
were nothing but the source of heartache. Other female folk artists of the
postwar period included Jagmohan Kaur and Narinder Biba. Their songs
often criticized family structures and politics in which women had to
egotiate a number of positions from housewife, lover, daughter-in-law to
matchmaker, and at the same time create a space for themselves of their
own. Their songs remain an inspiration even for today’s artists and bands
and provide material for numerous cover versions. Admittedly, the history
and development of women’s involvement in bhangra music remain to be
charted comprehensively.

8. See, for example, Gilbert and Pearson (1999: Ch. 4) for a useful
introduction and fuller discussion of the theory of gender and sexuality in
western dance music.

9. See Pickering and Negus (1998) for a critical appreciation of the collected
works of Frith.

10. Extract from interview conducted by the author with Suky Sohal, keyboard
player and band member of Birmingham-based Achanak (see Dudrah,
2001).

11. For accounts of inner city urban formations through the settlement of black
people in Birmingham and London, see Back (1996), Back and Navak
(1995) and Dudrah (2001). On the inner city as discourse and the
representation of black people in it, see Cohen (1997) and Farrar (1997).

12. It is important to point out here that not all British Asian audiences of
bhangra music simply understand the lyrics. Bhangra lyrics are sung
primarily in Punjabi, a regional language spoken in the states of Punjab in
both India and Pakistan. While listeners of the music may predominantly
be British Asians with affiliations to the Punjab, an assumption of simple
translation of the lyrics by all its listeners must be avoided. This is because
many second, third and fourth generations of British Asians do not fluently
speak or understand the language. Nonetheless, the wider appeal of British
bhangra is due to the fact that it is an energetic fusion-based dance music
that can be enjoyed by a number of different British Asians other than
Punjabis. The fact that the respondents were able to appreciate and talk
about bhangra lyrics is indicative of the context of the research, which was
undertaken in Birmingham. Here, the majority of South Asians have some
understanding of the Punjabi language.

13. Achanak literally translates as ‘suddenly’, which refers to the band’s sudden
appearance and success on the British bhangra scene in the late 1980s with
their track _Lah Noo Halade_ (Move That Hip). Achanak continually use the
word _Nach_ in all or part of the titles of their albums: _NACHurally_,
 hashCode, _sigNACHure_, _sNACH_ and _Top NACH_. Nach means ‘dance’, and
the clever play and combination of this Hindi/Punjabi/Urdu meaning
with a vernacular British vocabulary serves to illustrate the band’s eclectic
aspirations and vision for British popular music.
References

Discography
Achanak (1992) sNACH. Nachural Records, UK.

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**Discography**


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