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"You can't fuse yourself": contemporary British-Asian music and the musical expression of identity

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1. Introduction
2. Asian-language hits in the UK singles chart: Bally Sagoo and Kula Shaker
3. Beyond the hits: Nitin Sawhney, Asian Dub Foundation, Amar and Talvin Singh
4. Summary

1. Introduction

The observations presented in this paper concern developments in British popular music over the period 1995-1997, and relate to an increase in both the visibility of musicians of South Asian descent, and the audibility of musical elements which originate in or evoke South Asia¹. British Asian musicians² have made their presence felt in mainstream popular music in an unprecedented fashion over the last few years. Until the mid 1990s British Asians making pop music were perceived to be performing almost exclusively for Asian audiences, despite occasional crossovers (for example, singer Sheila Chandra's work with the pop group Monsoon). Bhangra, a kind of hybrid of Punjabi folk and disco elements which developed in the UK, became popular in sections of the Asian community (in the Punjabi community in particular), and received some attention in the British media in the late 1980s: nevertheless it was seen as music made by and for Asians, with recordings sold (often in large numbers) through Asian retailers making no impression on the pop mainstream and no appearance in the British charts³.

Suddenly however, Asian musicians are everywhere: two of the biggest hit records on the UK pop charts in 1996-97 were performed by all- or part-Asian acts, Babylon Zoo⁴ and White Town; Bally Sagoo has released the first two singles sung in an Asian language ever to make the higher reaches of the UK charts; several other artists are expected to make a similar impact over the next few years (Echobelly and Trickbaby both feature Asian female vocalists; teenage singer Amar was signed by Warner Brothers for a huge advance of £3 million; Cornershop, fronted by British Asian Tjinder Singh, have achieved considerable success with their album *When I Was Born for the 7th Time*; the Asian Dub Foundation are tipped by many as the 'next big thing', and so on)⁵.

It's not surprising that in tandem with this, "Indian" sounds are becoming increasingly prevalent in British pop music. The two developments are distinct however: interestingly, not all British Asian acts make noticeable use of South Asian musical elements, while a number of white British acts have been doing so - perhaps more so than even at the peak of the hippy era. A particularly notable example - although not the only one by any means - is the work of the rock band Kula Shaker, who have made substantial use of Indian music at the same time as drawing on Indian philosophy and making use of Hindu iconography on their promotional material.

My main aim here is to discuss the work of British Asian musicians who have consciously drawn on elements of South Asian folk, classical and pop music, combining these elements with mainstream English-language pop and rock and (especially, perhaps) African-American styles such as rap and hip-hop; artists who are doing so in a conscious attempt to express, to create even, a distinctive British Asian identity. The ideological message expressed by these musicians is generally, as we shall see, that all of these musical styles - Asian and Euro-American - are different elements in the musicians' own heritage; and that therefore they are expressing a single identity, rather than creating an experimental 'fusion' of styles.

Nitin Sawhney for instance, a fine guitarist, keyboard player and composer, was brought up in Rochester, England, by Punjabi immigrant parents. He explained the intention behind his own musical experiments to me in a recent interview.

Nitin Sawhney: ...it's about making my culture, my heritage, accessible to the context that I'm in, and that for me is the most important thing. For me, music is another vocabulary, it's just a language, it's no more than that, or less. The important thing for me, initially, is to have an idea that you want to express. And then, thereafter, to find the musical vocabulary to express it. Now, my experiences are of being British Asian, that's my life, that's everything that has happened to me. But I don't try to create a situation where I'm striving to find those common points [between Indian and Western music] in a forced way. I feel that I have to find them in order to express what I want to express.

(Extract from an interview for BBC Radio 4 programme Artworks, broadcast July 1997.)

Very much the same idea is expressed here - albeit with greater brevity - by Sawhney's contemporary, tabla player and record producer Talvin Singh.

"This isn't fusion. You can't fuse yourself."

(Talvin Singh, quoted by Bhattacharya, 1997)

It is difficult to focus an enquiry of this nature because, in reality, we cannot help but be concerned with several distinct yet overlapping musical 'scenes' rather than a single homogeneous one. Apart from the various British Asian artists (and indeed the many groups now active comprising members drawn from more than one ethnic group), and the white British acts making Indian-influenced music, we have to acknowledge the interaction with the music scene in South Asia itself. British Asian musicians such as Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo are well known, and popular in India (through exposure on satellite TV channels MTV Asia and Channel V in particular); young British Asians too continue to listen to Indian popular music, much of which shows the influence both of these artists and of many other styles of English-language pop music. The communication is now immediate, and the relationships between the different music scenes extremely complex. Boundaries become blurred, as Indian and British Asian popular music alike are consumed in both parts of the world. It would be extremely foolhardy therefore to attempt to define the boundaries of a British Asian music scene, or to attempt the description without first acknowledging this complexity.

The rest of this paper, then, will look at a number of contemporary British-Asian musicians. The discussion is based around a number of pieces of music which are described below⁶, which I'll use to draw out some of the issues which I think this phenomenon throws up. All of these examples are British-produced within the last three years (1995-97), and all the groups mentioned, apart from Kula Shaker, are of Asian ethnic origin.

2. Asian-language hits in the UK singles chart: Bally Sagoo and Kula Shaker

The period in question has been notable not least for the unprecedented appearance of Asian language popular music in the UK charts - of which I will now discuss two very different examples. I begin with Bally Sagoo, a British-born record producer of Punjabi parentage. His record Dil Cheez became the first Asian language hit in the UK charts, and in fact he had two Hindi-language hits in 1996 (at which time he also toured India with Michael Jackson). Sagoo's music on this track can be described as mainstream pop \oplus the base is essentially modern black American 'swing' - but with Hindi lyrics and vocal inflections (Dil Cheez also features a solo played on the Afghan rabab, besides the appearance of a number of Indian instruments, such as the flute and dholak (barrel drum)). Dil Cheez is set to a melody in Rag Bhairavi, probably the most common mode in Indian light classical and popular music. It is a ghazal, a type of romantic sung poem whose form originated in Persian culture, but which (in its Hindi/Urdu incarnation) has been a mainstay of Indian pop music for over 20 years⁷. The ghazal essentially comprises a string of loosely connected couplets, bound together by shared end-rhymes: the first couplet from Dil Cheez is given below (each half is written here on two lines for convenience).

Dil Cheez (Bally Sagoo) extract

Dil cheez hai kya jaana [What is a heart, my love]
Yeh jaan bhi tumhaari hai [When this life too belongs to you]
Tere baanhon me dam nikale [To breathe my last in your arms]
Hasarat yeh hamaari hai [This is my desire]

(Written: B. Sagoo/ S. M. Sadiq. Published. Rondor Music (London) Ltd/ Oriental Star Agencies Ltd/ MCI Publishing Ltd)

The success of this record marks an acceptance of Hindi-language pop by the mainstream, in one important sense at least: Sagoo had apparently had several million-selling records before this one, which were not recognised by the official charts because they were sold largely through Asian-owned shops. It is not clear to what extent non-Asian audiences are buying and listening to Sagoo's records, but if nothing else the interest of a major multinational record company (Columbia) in his work is significant, as is the fact that many people are now buying his records from major high-street record shops. Moreover, the commercial success itself ensures a certain amount of radio airplay and therefore publicity.

Also achieving great popularity in 1996-97 were the white British pop group Kula Shaker, who deserve a mention here if only as a point of contrast. Their first hit, Tattva, displays the band's interest in Hindu philosophy. Its lyrics are based on a philosophical aphorism (in Sanskrit), which is interpreted in the English lyrics of the song's verse.

Tattva (Kula Shaker) extract
Tattva, acintya bheda bheda tattva [Countless manifestations of the true essence]

Like the flower and the scent of summer
Like the sun and the shine
Well the truth may come in strange disguises
Send the message to your mind

Tattva

(Written: Mills/ Kula Shaker. Published. Hit and Run Music (Publishing) Ltd.)

Kula Shaker's third hit single, Govinda, was sung entirely in Sanskrit (surely the UK's third Asian-language hit record, after Bally Sagoo's two). This consists of a simple poem in praise of the Lord Krishna: like Tattva it's basically a rock number (and very much sixties-pastiche at that), albeit with evocative peacock sounds on the introduction, a tanpura (Indian drone-producing lute), and a female Indian voice singing harmony.

Govinda (Kula Shaker)
Govinda jaya jaya [lines in praise of Lord Krishna (=Govinda, Gopala, etc)]
Gopala jaya jaya
Radha-ramanahari
Govinda jaya jaya

Nrsingadeva jaya Nrsingadeva
Gaura gaura gaura hari
Gaura hari prabhupda
Govindam

(Written: Mills/ Kula Shaker. Published. Hit and Run Music (Publishing) Ltd.)

In both Kula Shaker's lyrics and their record artwork, there is an appropriation of Hindu imagery, in text and iconography. The message conveyed is familiar from the hippy era, that Indian means spiritual, mystical, peaceful - everything the West is not.

PICTURE 1

Figure 1: Artwork from the CD *K* by Kula Shaker

Crispian Mills, the lead singer and guitarist of Kula Shaker, explains the use of Indian sounds and images thus:

"The fusion of the music was totally natural. I got into the philosophy first—Indian concepts like karma and vegetarianism. I am touched by the whole culture and the spirituality that permeates it. If you take the spirituality out of western music there will be something left. If you take it out of Indian music, there's nothing left." (quoted by Datar, 1997)

The reaction of British pop fans to Kula Shaker – with or without Indian elements – was phenomenal; not surprisingly perhaps, the reaction of British Asians is rather more equivocal. Shabs, the British Asian boss of Outcaste Records, says of Kula Shaker:

"You could say it's a brilliant piece of exploitation of Indian mysticism, even though I don't like it. To tell the truth I'm actually a bit jealous of Kula Shaker, but I do wonder if four Indian guys had produced this whether it would have received such a rapturous welcome." (quoted by Datar, 1997)

Shri, an Indian-born bass-player and producer who has recently worked with a number of British Asian colleagues, says this of Crispian Mills:

"It's a shame that when a white artist does something with Indian influences, everyone goes: 'Wow! This man knows about India!' But when British Asians try and rediscover their roots, everyone says: 'Well, that's only to be expected.' It's no different to when Elvis did black songs in the fifties." (quoted by Datar, 1997)

while Tjinder Singh of Cornershop has this to say:

"The bloke is a moron" (quoted by Datar, 1997)

The distaste many British Asians feel for the essentialising representation of Indian culture in Kula Shaker's work is clear; the shadow of Orientalist fantasy falls all too obviously, in the perpetuation of an imaginary mysterious and exotic Other in the East. These reactions do show however that British Asians are finding a voice to object to this representation of Indian culture, and indeed that that voice is being represented in the British media – significantly, this is itself the result of other British Asians beginning to reach prominent positions in sections of the print and broadcast media.

3. Beyond the hits: Nitin Sawhney, Asian Dub Foundation, Amar and Talvin Singh
Some British Asian musicians are doing more ambitious things, musically, than either Bally Sagoo or Kula Shaker. Many of these musical developments revolve around the use of modern studio technology, in particular sampling; and the adaptation of contemporary dance music styles such as hip-hop, jungle, ragga and drum 'n' bass, along with the vocal styles $\text{\textcircled{D}}$ such as rap $\text{\textcircled{D}}$ which are associated with some of them.

The use of sampling technology in these cases can be quite instructive: the choice of samples, particularly samples evoking India in some way, deserves scrutiny – and, I believe, suggests ways in which musical languages are adapted in order to convey new meanings. One group working in contemporary dance music, the Asian Dub Foundation (ADF), used a variety of samples on their album *Facts and Fictions*. Their song *Rebel Warrior*, for instance, begins with a recitation of the Bengali poem which inspired the lyrics of the piece, *Bidrohi* by Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Rebel Warrior (Asian Dub Foundation) extract

Ami bidrohi! [I am the rebel]

I am the rebel warrior

I have risen alone

With my head held high

I will only rest

When the cries of the oppressed
No longer reach the sky
When the sound of the sword of the oppressor
No longer rings in battle
Hear my warcry!

(Written: Das, Savale, Pandit. Published. QFM Warner Chapell)

The use of instrumental samples in this piece is particularly interesting: short looped samples of tanpura (drone lute) and sarangi (fiddle) are used alongside the recitation, while a female Indian voice sings immediately following the exhortation "Hear my warcry!"; looped samples of dhol (barrel drum) rhythms are mixed into the main texture of the piece. Whatever the group's intention in composing the piece, my reaction as a listener is to read these as symbolic gestures, at least in part. As a listener I am struck by the use of an Indian voice as the "warcry", and its juxtaposition against a punk-style guitar riff (a startling number of British Asian musicians profess themselves to have been inspired by the punk movement)⁸.

On this song's promotional video, many of the points expressed in their music and lyrics are reinforced as the group are pictured on a (poor, working class) housing estate. There are various messages contained in the film, as for instance in the gesture of burning a historic map of the British Empire; in the use of the British Union flag as a stage decoration (the flag has often been used as a symbol by British fascist and racist organisations, and by the xenophobic and insular Conservative Party - so the appropriation is a powerful gesture). But even more basic is the backdrop: we're in Britain, not India or Bangladesh, and the bystanders are white, black and Asian. There is, I need hardly add, no hint of exoticism in the presentation.

Nitin Sawhney's composition "Market Daze" is another example of the sophisticated use of samples - in this case, recordings of an Indian street flautist (Sawhney made the recordings himself while on holiday in India): the piece uses a slow hip-hop beat, mixed with tabla, dholak and Indian cymbals, over which Sawhney plays what is effectively a duet between himself on piano and the sampled flute. It's also notable the way Sawhney subtly blends Indian-style melodic phrases and rhythmic techniques (such as the use of quintuplets and cross-rhythmic five-note phrases) with a more jazz-derived melodic style of piano playing.

Another side of Sawhney's work can be heard in *Displacing the Priest*, which uses a rather different combination of instruments. A three-part composition which begins with a leisurely movement featuring Indian violinist Chandrashekhar, and ends with hectic drum 'n' bass, the middle section of *Displacing the Priest* (featuring violin, synthesisers, beat-box and West African jembe drum) includes this rap:

Displacing the Priest (Nitin Sawhney) extract
My mind is, I find is
Now we see who the blind is
A derisory illusion
Designed by the preachers and the authors of confusion
This is the time
There is no sign
The writing on the wall
For alone we must stand
But together we will surely fall
This is the fate of the collective
As victims of the holy and religious unelected
Displace the priest
(Freedom is within)

(Written: Nitin Sawhney/ Charles Oleghe. Published. Outcaste Records.)

The lyrics of *Displacing the Priest* & a dismissal of organised religion, both Eastern and Western, in favour of a more individually-realised spirituality - certainly present a contrast to Kula Shaker's wholesale adoption of Vaishnava Hindu philosophy⁹.

Leaving Nitin Sawhney for a while, we can move on to another phenomenon: the 17-year old British Asian girl Amar recently signed a huge £3M record deal with Warner Music, who clearly see her as a star of the future. One of her recent (but non-Warner) recordings, made with the producer and tabla player Talvin Singh, shows off her talents in two idioms, as she shifts from a Hindi lyric sung in Indian pop style to an English lyric sung in an Anglo-American soul style, before combining the two in a quite disorienting way. The lyric too is interesting for the way it plays with the ghazal form: setting up the first half of the anticipated couplet in Hindi/Urdu, only to complete it in English, the singer clearly plays with her listener's expectations on a number of different levels at once.

Jaan (Talvin Singh featuring Amar) extract
O mere jaani jaan [Oh my dear beloved]
Aankhon se dura na ho [Do not go far from my eyes]
Don't know how that sounds
Feeling's only getting stronger

(Published. Chrysalis Music Ltd)

I have described a number of techniques and strategies above, which have been exploited by British Asian musicians: the fusing of English-language pop styles with Indian lyrical, rhythmic and melodic gestures (as in Bally Sagoo's *Dil Cheez*); the sampling of South Asian elements, and their use to support ideological messages (ADF's *Rebel Warrior*); dueting with Indian musicians in absentia (Nitin Sawhney's *Market Daze*); writing lyrics with relevance to both South Asian and Euro-American cultures (the same composer's *Displacing the Priest*); juxtaposing Asian and American vocal styles (Amar's *Jaan*). These musical strategies clearly hint at the process of coming to terms with a background both British and Asian, of trying to forge a single identity from disparate elements - in short, the expression of an identity, even the creation of identity, being carried out symbolically in musical form. In fact, one can go further and suggest that they represent attempts to forge a new symbolic language with which to speak of a 'British Asian identity', if such a thing can indeed be said to exist. One of the things I'm intrigued by is the symbolic function of different musical elements, as (at least in my interpretation above) may be the case in ADF's *Rebel Warrior*. The use of Western and Indian instruments together is not necessarily intended in this way; but I can describe at least one example where this definitely is the case. This is another piece by Nitin Sawhney, *Migration*, which the sleeve notes (and the record artwork) make very clear is meant to be symbolically representational.

PICTURE 2

Figure 2: Artwork from the CD *Migration*

Migration (Nitin Sawhney) sleeve notes

"From the 1947 partition of India to the 60's migration of our parents, we are the product of mass movement-

this is the story of Migration-

-Departure

-Arrival

-Adaptation

-Fusion

From the anguish, turmoil and pain of our parents' history comes the responsibility to build our own dreams.

This is the sound track to our journey."

These four stages are represented musically by first Indian elements (from 'jungle' sound effects to the sound of the tabla (drum pair) and shahnai (shawm)), then obviously Western elements in the form of a jazz-funk groove, and then different degrees of fusion of the two. The first transition from India to the West, in particular, is interesting both for the clearly apparent symbolism and for the musically elegant way in which it is effected.

Of course, just because Sawhney did this once, it doesn't mean that the same degree of symbolic representation is always intended. But what did ADF mean when they followed the call "Hear my warcry!" with a sample of an Asian vocalist? (and, for that matter, in what way is her gender significant?) What did Amar and Talvin Singh mean when they juxtaposed North American and South Asian vocal styles, opening a ghazal in Urdu only to complete it in English? These examples seem to me to lend themselves to symbolic interpretations in a way which Bally Sagoo's more straightforward fusion on Dil Cheez does not (nor, perhaps, do many of the songs of Tjinder Singh's Cornershop, despite pointed but decidedly tongue-in-cheek gestures such as covering The Beatles' Norwegian Wood in Punjabi translation).

A further instance is provided by another piece from ADF: Journey, which describes the same process of migration as Sawhney's composition. The middle section of this song describes the journey of a young Asian immigrant Ð a journey, I take it, both physical and metaphorical as the boy comes to terms with his new environment. This journey, described as "from loneliness to pride", is dramatised in the middle section of the song;

Journey (Asian Dub Foundation) extract
(spoken)

The nine year old boy
Who had wanted to be white
Set out on a journey
From loneliness to pride
Hostile environments along the way
A slowly changing landscape
But a steady stream of consciousness rising
A steady stream of consciousness rising

This is the journey from loneliness to pride
No longer any need to hideÉ

(rap)

Struggle to live
And we cry struggle to survive
Struggla, struggla, struggla, struggla
Just to stay alive
In the jungle you either do or you die
You got to be aware
You got to have the jungle eyeÉ

(Written: Das, Pandit, Savale, Zaman. Published. QFM Warner Chapell)

As the spoken words seem to announce, THIS is the journeyÉ, the first obviously Asian samples of the piece are introduced, in particular a cleverly manipulated loop of a female vocalist. The treatment of this sample is also interesting: starting with a prominent place in the mix, it's gradually overshadowed by the beat box and rap vocal (the lonely Asian voice gathering support and strength perhaps?); then a sequence of guitar chords harmonises the sampled vocal line, altering our perception of it; and finally the original sample is pulled out of the mix, leaving behind the guitar riff which had been its accompaniment. Again, it is extremely difficult not to read symbolic meanings into the musical

composition - symbolisms which reinforce the sense of the lyrics. Such symbolism is perhaps not always intended. However, the way artists use elements which clearly represent or invoke different cultures is surely significant even where the artists are politically silent (as is Bally Sagoo - at least in his music) or naive (as are Kula Shaker). It surely has to mean something when we do these things; when we combine musical elements of very different origins we are saying something about the relationships between cultures, whether we like it or not.

4. Summary

There has been an unprecedented explosion of British Asian participation in popular music in recent years. Many of the artists involved are making music which draws on a variety of musical traditions including Indian classical, folk and popular, English-language pop and rock, including punk rock, reggae, soul, rap, hip-hop, jungle, and drum 'n bass. In some cases (as with Bally Sagoo) the product is intended as mainstream pop music, albeit a new kind of mainstream defined on (British) Asian terms. But for a significant number of artists the musical processes are part of a conscious strategy of establishing an identity as British Asian, which expresses pride in Asian heritage while engaging with the reality of modern British society. As Shabs says of one of his label's leading artists, Nitin Sawhney:

"I can take one of Nitin's records to any of my friends Ð white, black, whatever Ð and I can say to them, 'There, now you understand my generation.'" (quoted by Bhattacharya, 1997)

Kula Shaker's representation of Indian culture is a useful contrast to the kinds of processes which are going on in the work of British Asian artists. The various criticisms of this band by Asians are significant, because they are the clearest manifestations of a struggle going on over the use of cultural symbols carried by music: Kula Shaker say Indian music means Vaishnava Hindu devotionalism, spirituality and mysticism; many British Asian artists would deny them this appropriation. If ever there were an example of the way in which popular culture can provide an arena in which ideological conflicts are fought out and identities forged and expressed, this is it. I think it's appropriate to leave the last word to the most outspoken of the artists considered in this paper, ADF:

Jericho (Asian Dub Foundation) extract
For the consciousness of the nation
Sounds of the Asian Dub FoundationÉ

We ain't ethnic, exotic or eclectic
The only 'e' we use is electric
An Asian background
That's what's reflected
But this militant vibe
Ain't what you expected
With your liberal minds you patronise our culture
Scanning the surface like vultures
With your tourist mentality
We're still the natives
You're multicultural but we're anti-racist
We ain't ethnic, exotic or eclectic
The only 'e' we use is electric

(Written: Das, Pandit, Savale, Zaman. Published. QFM Warner Chapell)

Discography

Asian Dub Foundation; "Rebel Warrior", "Journey" and "Jericho" from Facts and Fictions, (Nation Records NAT58CD, 1995)

Bally Sagoo; "Dil Cheez" from *Rising from the East*, (Columbia/ Sony Music 485016 2, 1996)
Cornershop; "Norwegian Wood (This bird has flown)" from *When I Was Born for the 7th Time*, (Wiija WIJCD 1065, 1997)
Kula Shaker; "Tattva", "Govinda" from *K* (Columbia/ Sony Music SHAKER 1CD, 1996)
Nitin Sawhney; "Market Daze", "Migration" from *Migration* (Outcaste CASTE CD 001, 1995)
____; "Displacing the Priest", "In the Mind" from *Displacing the Priest* (Outcaste CASTE CD 2, 1996)
Talvin Singh featuring Amar; "Jaan" from *Talvin Singh presents Anokha: Soundz of the Asian Underground* (Omni/Mango CIDM 1120/ 524 341-2, 1997)

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1By South Asia I mean essentially the Indian subcontinent: the nations of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh in particular.

2By this I mean both those born on the Indian subcontinent and subsequently settled in the UK, and those born in the UK of South Asian immigrant parents.

3For a discussion of bhangra, see the works of Banerjee and Baumann (together and separately), Burton & Awan 1994, and various authors in Sharma et al 1996.

4Babylon Zoo's Jaz Mann has been described as the first Asian to reach Number 1 in the UK charts: in fact he was preceded by Queen's Freddie Mercury, although Mercury's Asian heritage was until recently little known.

5For further information on these and other acts, see for instance Sharma et al 1996, and Pride et al 1997.

6References are given in a discography at the end of this paper.

7For a discussion of the ghazal in Indian popular music, see Manuel 1988 or 1993.

8Rebel Warrior is also discussed by Sanjay Sharma (Sharma et al 1996, 50-51).

9Vaishnava: worshipping Vishnu, particularly in his incarnations as Krishna and Rama.