Desi Music Vibes: The Performance of Indian Youth Culture in Chicago
by
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Introduction

*Desi* and *desi music* are general terms currently used by young Indian-Americans to describe South Asians and South Asian music, especially in the diaspora, especially referring to modern dance hybrids. This essay is based upon research with the South Asian community in Chicago, specifically focusing on its youth, mostly second-generation Indian-Americans. After placing Indian-Americans within the discourse on diaspora, I will analyze how the genre *desi* music is used to create, mediate, and sustain the diasporic identity of South Asian youth.\(^1\)

Here, *desi* music will refer to both *bhangra-beat* (a genre of Punjabi folk music remixed over Western dance club rhythms -- hip-hop, house, techno, etc.) and Hindi remixes (a genre combining Hindi film songs with similar dance club beats), both of which originate in Britain, and which scholars and journalists have often collapsed under the term *bhangra*. *Desi* music encompasses multiple fluid forms, heavily shaped by local contexts and tastes; a particularly local Chicago identity is produced by incorporating *house* music, an upbeat, repetitive dance club rhythm (Figure 2) that arose as an underground black dance music in Chicago in the 1980s. Chicago Desis thereby stake out a local space in the international diasporic Indian popular music scene.

In recent years, there has been much debate over the use, misuse, and even usefulness of the term “diaspora” as applied to dispersed immigrant communities. Though some conceptualizations of diaspora imply that it should have several generations of settlement outside the homeland, I argue that Indian youth in America, comprised of some immigrants and predominantly second-generation Indian-Americans, fit into the parameters of “diaspora,” and I find the theorization surrounding this term useful for understanding their group dynamics.

This study also follows one of the most important insights of ethnomusicology in the last two decades, which is, to paraphrase Anthony Seeger, that music does not simply happen in society, but often society happens in music (Seeger 1987). Far from simply “reflecting” social processes, music provides contexts in which cultural meaning is formulated and negotiated. Among diaspora communities, music is vital for formulating diasporic cultural identity. Stokes argues that “music does not then simply provide a marker in a prestructured social space, but the means by which this space can be transformed” (Stokes 1994:4). In diasporic
situation, music indeed transforms space, in two ways: first, music unifies diaspora groups, in musical contexts where the homeland is semiotically conjured through musical sound. In its mediated forms, music also provides a means of diasporic communication between separate diaspora communities, so that, for example, Indians in New York are aware of what Indians in London or Trinidad are playing and saying, and vice versa. Secondly, music empowers diaspora groups by staking out a unique cultural space in the host nation, providing a voice for the marginalized community. Among young Indian-Americans, desi music is used not only to cross the distance to India, but to create an entirely new space, one that asserts and affirms both aspects of their hyphenated identities. In Chicago, desi music takes a form which not only expresses diasporic Indian-American identity, but local Indo-Chicagoan identity.

Indians in America and Indian-Americans: Diaspora Revisited

The history of dispersion from India shares many traits with classic (although, as Tölölyan [1996] critiques, overly static) conceptualizations of diaspora populations (cf. Safran 1991, Clifford 1994, Hall 1994, Tölölyan 1996). Dispersion has deeply affected Indian culture since pre-history. In addition to forced and unforced population movements in Aryan and Moghul India, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen large scale migrations of Indians across the globe. Many originally emigrated as indentured workers, while in the last few decades, more often for professional and educational opportunities. The South Asian diaspora in the U.S. is mostly representative of the latter group.

Transnational Indians generally maintain myths of the homeland, with which they personally and communally identify. Among what Mishra (1996) calls the “old” Indian diaspora of exclusivity, this took the form of recreating their culture in diverse locations (Ghosh 1989), isolated from the homeland and marginalized in the hostland. He contrasts this with the new, “border” Indian diaspora of recent decades, which mediates between homeland and hostland in much more complex and mobile ways, including through films and music. Mishra’s conception of the Indian diaspora, however, is immigrant-centered, and does not take into account successive generations, children born in the host country who are establishing diasporic relationships with India. Today, young Indian-Americans (mostly second generation), while rooted in American youth culture, still insist on including Indian culture in their lives, seen, for example, through interest in Indian languages, music, cuisine, and cinema, participation in cultural organizations (such as student, religious, and regional associations), and often predominantly associating socially with other Indians. These factors, along with the more recent advent of Indian club parties and desi music, consciously construct and maintain individual and communal ties to India.
Many young Indians, rather than losing these ties, are in fact strengthening them, thus legitimizing reference to second generation Indian-Americans as diasporic.

Another classic trait of diaspora theorization is that diaspora groups are, or believe that they are, marginalized from the mainstream, alienated as displaced “others.” Young Indian-Americans, though not literally displaced, are at times made to feel so, both by the mainstream, and by being able to see their own community’s “otherness” with American eyes. This is an important point vis-à-vis desi music, which provides young Indians both a self-affirming and empowering bond of commonality, and a public statement of their place in mainstream American youth culture, in effect as “cool” (a point to which I will return). To the extent that young Indian-Americans are made to feel like outsiders, desi music is an example of what Clifford calls “political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community” (Clifford 1994:308).

The “new” Indian community’s diasporicity is also greatly influenced by their high educational and economic status, allowing them to maintain links to India, especially by visiting and keeping in touch with relatives. One distinction Tölöyan makes between diasporas and simple dispersions is that the latter lack “the material resources, the socio-political infrastructure, or the discursive incentives to represent themselves as diasporas” (Tölöyan 1996:3), and the post-1960s Indian community certainly has these qualities. Almost all at least have access to avenues of knowledge and discourse about the homeland through various social networks and communicative media. Recent years have seen a dramatic increase of Internet newspapers, newsgroups and websites (Rai 1995), satellite television broadcasting, and increased global distribution of cultural products like movies and popular music. Improved technological means of maintaining contact with homeland culture and current events has greatly increased diasporic discourse and participation in homeland issues. Appadurai notes that “the global flow of images, news, and opinion now provides part of the engaged cultural and political literacy that diasporic persons bring to their spatial neighborhoods” (Appadurai 1996:197).

Although most Indians in America do not articulate a conscious “myth of return” (cf. Safran 1991), of going back to live in the homeland, Maira points out how Indian-Americans use a figurative language of return when visiting India, of “going back” to a homeland that they never left (1999:51). Many Indian immigrants, and even more so second generation Indian-Americans, prefer this detached arrangement, constructing a new definition of the return myth which allows them to partake in homeland culture without the disadvantages of living in a homeland which, as Safran writes referring to Mexican-Americans, “cannot be easily idealized” (Safran 1991:90). Young Indian-Americans are the first to see regressive elements
in Indian society. For example, the skits performed at the University of Illinois’ 1998 India Night (an annual cultural celebration sponsored by the Indian Students Association), at once embraced and rebelled against aspects of Indian culture. While depicting images of the cultural glory of ancient India, the story also criticized traditional structures of arranged marriage, caste division, and domineering family relationships, and emphasized youth independence.

By taking what they want of Indian culture, Indian-Americans are able to idealize the homeland and feel part of an ancient and deep cultural heritage. Desi music culture, though a strong signifier of youth independence and modernity, at times taps into imaginings of India’s “ancient tradition.” For example, one DJ described using Indian instruments in his mixes as obtaining a “tribal sound,” and most DJs refer to even the most Westernized South Asian musical output as “traditional.” Bhangra-beat is also often spoken of as traditional, regardless of its diasporic production or its degree of reference to the Punjabi folk genre. At the same time, however, Indian-Americans’ imagination of India is strongly informed by Hindi films (“musicals” where songs partially constitute desi music), which often portray an idealized vision of a highly modern and cosmopolitan India. Hindi films are extremely popular throughout Indian diaspora communities, and represent perhaps the most important source of homeland imagination. For the new “border” diaspora, films and film music represent an extreme degree of mobile border mediation, allowing “instant return” to an imaginary homeland. For Indian youth, Hindi films and film music thus allow simultaneously for homeland images which are idealized both as traditional and cosmopolitan. This is a significant aspect of cultural identity formation, which as Stuart Hall explains (1994:394),

is a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being.” It belongs to the future as much as to the past. . . Cultural identities . . . are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture, and power. . . identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

**Indians and Indian Music in Chicago**

Unlike many Indian diaspora communities, the immigration of Indians into the U.S. is quite recent, especially in Chicago, where Indians did not form a significant population until the 1970s. The small number that came in the first few decades of this century were diasporic in the strictest sense: most were coerced to leave by economic necessity, and most intended to return to the homeland (Gelder 1981:4). They were also in a very real sense alienated by the host culture. The tendency of Indians to
save diligently and send most of their money "home" created negative stereotypes and racist attitudes towards Indians, who, along with other Asians, were viewed as an economic drain on the nation. Discriminatory immigration policies peaked in the teens and twenties, when almost all Asian immigration to the U.S. was halted.

American tolerance for Indian immigration improved after World War II, due in part to U.S. support for the nationalist movement in India. Indians were removed from the "Asiatic barred zone" in 1946, although the number of immigrants was still heavily restricted. It was not until the removal of the immigrant quota system in 1965 that Indians formed any significant population in Chicago. The community rapidly grew in the 1970s: while the U.S. census figures report 68 Indians in the Chicago area in 1960, in 1970 there were 713, and in 1981 around 30,000 (ibid.:7). The Indian population settlement in Chicago has not been strictly segregated or internally cohesive, but rather is quite dispersed. There are, however, large population settlements around Devon Avenue on the far north side of the city, and in certain north-west suburbs.

The social position of these recent immigrants was quite distinct from the workers of the first half of the century. In part because of surviving preferential immigration policies, recent Indian immigrants have come from the middle and upper-middle classes of India, the majority highly educated or becoming so. These immigrants have consciously maintained a strong sense of Indian culture, supported in part by copious Indian religious and cultural activities. The community also saw that establishing a solid political voice in Chicago was vital to protecting its interests. Organizations such as the Indian League of America and the Association of Indians in America were especially concerned with involving Indians in the political process (ibid.:22), and used Indian cultural events and educational seminars to foster a pan-Indian identity from the diverse regional, social, and cultural make-up of the community. While Geldard felt in 1979 that unity did not yet exist in Chicago's Indian community, desi music, as we shall see, is contributing to this in the next generation.

For first generation immigrants, patronage of Indian musical activities has been a vital aspect of strengthening the diasporic community here and maintaining ties to the homeland. Many Indian social gatherings include popular, folk, and semi-classical music, while in local religious contexts, devotional music is important. While Geldard found most of this music to be performed live, today, live performance has been almost entirely replaced by recorded music and especially by DJs, who are cheaper and have greater musical variety than live acts.3

The performance of classical Indian music around Chicago is infrequent compared to popular and light-classical genres; there is not nearly
as large a classical music scene as in, for example, the San Francisco Bay area or New York. Classical Indian music concerts around Chicago are regular but infrequent, although the number is increasing in recent years, and these are almost always performances of established artists from India – very few local musicians are capable of performing Indian classical music at the concert level. Geldard found that already by 1980, local artists with some classical training performed only light and popular genres (ibid.:59). Even visiting Indian artists tend more often to be Indian pop or film stars. Local Indian musicians are all amateurs in that none reach high levels of expertise or pursue music performance as a sole profession. Geldard found that with no expert musicians and little classical music knowledge among audiences who praised almost any musical talent, amateurs were able to flourish in Chicago with “little fear of criticism on technical grounds” (ibid.:90).

In the last ten or fifteen years, DJs with far less classical musical knowledge have largely replaced amateur musicians. The dominance of pre-recorded music in public musical contexts has effectively “solved” the issue of musicianship. Through DJ-ing, young music lovers are able to satisfy themselves and audiences through musical “performance” without the particular necessity of musical knowledge or laborious hours of practice. Almost none of the DJs interviewed for this article were musicians. Similar to Indian musicians, few DJs are strictly professionals. Almost all have other jobs or are in school, as DJ-ing is rarely a lucrative full-time profession. Perhaps traditional attitudes which tend to devalue professional musicianship have an influence as well.

Geldard’s prediction for the future of even popular Indian music surviving in Chicago through the next generation was bleak. Already in the late seventies some Indian youth were American-born, growing up exposed to the same mainstream culture as other Americans. Geldard explains:

They are consequently attracted not towards Indian music but rather toward American popular music. . . If the next generation of Indians in Chicago does not continue the musical traditions of its parents, Indian popular music performance will rapidly die out. . . Considering the present attitudes of the young American-born Indians one might speculate that Indian music of all kinds will die a natural death in the future.” (ibid.:217-18)

Having today the perspective of studying Indian-American youth a generation after the youth of Geldard’s study, I find that interest in Indian music has hardly died out. A trip to any Indian video/music store on Devon Avenue will reveal that Indian popular music is as vibrant as ever, some of
it in new diasporic forms that reflect the cosmopolitan identities of Indo-American youth.

Music in the Identity of Indian-American Youth

For the purposes of this study, Indian-American youth are defined specifically as being close to college age (approximately eighteen to twenty-five years old), and as almost entirely comprising American-born second generation immigrants of South Asian descent. Young Indian-Americans must come to terms with their identities in complex and sometimes difficult ways, for they are at once fully and not fully Americans. The preferences, character, and use of music among this group not only exemplify their situation but are integral parts of its mediation.

Popular music is central to identity construction for most young Americans; as part of this group, Indian-Americans grow up listening mostly to mainstream popular music. It was not until the 1990s that a distinct Indian-American genre of popular music was created, and even then, this formed only a fraction of the music preferred by most young Indians. The development of this music fulfilled a dual function for this group, a response to both internal and external needs. Internally, desi music has allowed for the continuation of an Indian diasporic identity, using music and imagery from India, as well as from other Indian diaspora communities, in a context which is new, personal, and meaningful to these youth. Externally, desi music serves as a means of consolidating and unifying a previously much more diffuse young Indian population, allowing for a sense of belonging and of security amidst an American culture which at times has made them feel like outsiders, the objects of prejudice and stereotypes. Many of the youth interviewed for this article mentioned experiencing prejudice while growing up, although some optimistically felt that biased attitudes towards Indians have decreased in their lifetime (DJ Raj, DJ Bnoy, personal interviews).

Several desi DJs did not hesitate to suggest that desi music is contributing to greater understanding of Indian culture in America by exposing mainstream youth to elements of Indian music (although this is perhaps more their desired perception than reality -- so far, very few non-Indians are attracted to desi parties). The sentiment of these DJs parallels that of some British bhangra artists who feel that bhangra has been integral in improving Anglo-Indian relations, decreasing the tension arising from stereotypes and mistrust (Banerji and Baumann 1990; Hoosee and Dar 1996:91-92). Music has long been one of the most recognizable traits of Indian culture for Americans, and today it remains one of the most important emblems of Indian culture in both Britain and America.
In Britain, the bridge between the two musical cultures can be credited in part to the early 1980s advent of Indo-pop (which was more popular with Europeans than South Asians) and to the “new Asian Kool” club scene which attempted to appeal to a diverse crowd through Indian themes (Huq 1996). Recently in Chicago, an Indian-themed club called Karma opened which has similar aspirations. Indians are also increasingly visible both in mainstream popular music, with Indian members in several prominent bands including Soundgarden, Babylon Zoo, and Cornershop, and in a resurgence of Indian motifs in popular culture (for example, Madonna’s recent penchant for mendhi, ornate henna tattoos) (Hamilton 1997; Datar 1997). Desi Music Vibes, one of the primary promoters of desi music in Chicago, is likewise beginning to promote groups consisting predominantly or entirely of Indian musicians who play American popular music.

One of the most interesting aspects of young Indians’ search for both acceptance and individuality in America, and a prominent aspect in desi music, is the reliance on indices of black American culture, present in musical choices as well as aspects of image, style, body language, and speech. Throughout the Indian diaspora, Indians have existed alongside Africans and the African diaspora. In Britain, where in fact Indians are usually subsumed under the label “black” (cf. Sanjay Sharma 1996) Indian artists like Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo “draw heavily upon black diasporic musical idioms (reggae, techno, house, soul) . . . and methods (sampling, mixing, scratching)” (Gopinath 1995:311). In Trinidad, Indians participate to some extent in Afro-Trinidadian genres such as calypso, soca, and steelpan, and draw on these genres in creating the Indo-Trinidadian musical style chutney.

Similarly, young Indian-Americans rely upon urban black music as a basis for their own styles. Some writers on bhangra in Britain have offered a political rationalization for the use of rap and hip-hop elements: in light of the popularity of these forms and considering their heritage as “global protest music,” Indians are most effectively able to use this music to speak to their own oppression (see, for example, many of the essays in S. Sharma et al., eds. 1996). Yet these writers, except in the cases of a few explicitly political rap acts, seem to exaggerate the social protest element of British bhangra, which is in essence a good-time party music. Political explanations are perhaps even less applicable to American desi music. Indians may face certain discrimination, but it is aesthetic factors such as the danceable beats of house and hip-hop and the cultural identification with bhangra and Hindi film songs which are appealing to desi music fans far more than any implications the music has for social protest.
Protest elements occasionally appear in desi music, for example in the case of Sikh rapper A.K. of the group T.S. Soundz, whose militant demeanor derives from his perception of racist attitudes towards Indians (and towards Sikhs by Muslims and Hindus), and his imagination of historical Sikh militant resistance against oppression; in this case, the black power element of rap seems to be of direct influence to T. S. Soundz's form of Sikh power. Similarly, in the documentary film Desi Remix, Chicago Style, Sunny Singh of T.S. Soundz holds up his left hand and says, "This is the Indian." Raising his right thumb, he says, "This is the white man." Pressing his thumb into his palm and pulling it away, he says, "When the white man puts pressure on the Indian, the skin turns white" (Dhenjan 1995). Examples such as T.S. Soundz, while interesting, are nevertheless rare, at least in Chicago.

I read the link to "blackness" less as a form of direct social protest than as an identification with the shared heritage of Indians and blacks as minorities, who, in greatly different ways and degrees, have been oppressed. As Rose writes, "Hip hop is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization" (1994:21). The music of black youth is borrowed in part because of its strong identity-asserting role, expressing a refusal to assimilate to white culture, to stake out a distinct niche in the meaning of "American." In other words, desi music represents less a protest directed outward and demanding social change (as in rap) than an appeal within the subculture to resist change; i.e., maintain a distinct identity. This diasporic process is reminiscent of the rise of nationalism in India, where the promotion of an "inner cultural sphere" asserting cultural sovereignty long preceded the overt political struggle against colonial rule (Chatterjee 1993). Thus, while I wish not to over-politicize desi music as oriented towards external protest, it also functions as much more than simply party music: it very consciously asserts an internal, separate, and vital Indian identity through the combination of popular Indian music and black "underground" house music and hip-hop5 -- in short, it is more about pride than protest.

The affinity to "blackness" goes beyond borrowed musical style. The choice of hip-house in desi culture carries with it the "homeboy" imagery of the genre -- in order to "authenticate" the borrowed musical elements, it must by necessity borrow from hip-hop style, vernacular speech, and gesticulation.6 While in cities like New York and Chicago desi culture may have direct contact with urban hip-hop culture, it is likely that the most important source for the diffusion of hip-hop style is rap videos, disseminated especially through MTV. "Rap music videos," Rose (1994) writes, "have animated hip hop cultural style and aesthetics and have facilitated a cross-neighborhood, cross-country (transnational?) dialogue in a social environment that is highly segregated by class and race (9). . .
MTV’s acceptance and gatekeeping of rap music has dramatically increased rap artist’s visibility to black, white, Asian, and Latino teenagers. . .” (17).

Young Indians are certainly not the only American youth who look to African-America for imagery. Mainstream American youth culture has a prominent romanticization of the urban black subculture and its associated music, which carry strong connotations of “coolness.” Among Indians, the adoption of this imagery serves just this function, to heighten (or more accurately, “badden”) their social image. This tendency is perhaps even stronger for Indians than for whites, for two reasons. First is the shared heritage of Indians and blacks as minorities who, in different ways and to different degrees, have been oppressed and stereotyped. Second, because of the ways Indian youth are stereotyped, they are under more social pressure to appear “cool.” The stereotypes placed on Indians -- as “passive” Asians, as having repressed sexuality and overprotective families -- lead young Indo-Americans to want very much to overcome these stereotypes. By adopting images of “blackness,” they are pulled closer to the “cool” end of youth culture’s social hierarchy. Huq explains a similar need in Britain, applying equally to this case (1996:63):

Western popular culture has long been over-endowed with stereotypical images of Asians as submissive, hard-working, passive and conformist. These deep-seated media representations spanning three decades of mass migration are still crucially important in shaping perceptions of contemporary Asian club culture. Black iconography in popular culture contrastingly has always been seen as cool and hard by youth culture at large: something to aspire to.

However, in Chicago, an additional reason for the use of the house beat (Figure 2) as a basis for desi music is a self-identification with Chicago, more than with black culture per se. Chicago desi music is replete with musical, textual, and iconographic references to the city (see Figure 1).

The choice of house in desi music expresses an identity not only as Indo-Americans, but Indo-Chicagoans. Additionally, Indians’ borrowing of blackness is not an end in itself, but a means from which to build their own voice. Sunny Singh of T.S. Soundz, the most influential Chicago desi DJs, relates how, coming from Toronto, he at first used strictly bhangra rhythms. When T.S. Soundz formed in Chicago, Singh explains (Dhenjan 1995):

We were exposed so much to hip-house . . . and the influence of dance music, that we started using it. We’re using it, but we’re blending it with the Indian music . . . eventually, when we find the right sound, it’s going to be so
unique and so different, that it won't belong to the black people anymore. It won't belong to the bhangra. It will belong to our subculture.

Figure 1: Cassette cover of “Chicago Hot Mix” by DJ Srinu

Indians in the U.S. are beginning to find a voice in popular music, not by being assimilated indistinguishably into mainstream American pop, but on their own terms, creating forms which exhibit both their American and Indian sensibilities. This has not occurred to the degree that it has in Britain, which has a proportionately much larger Indian population and supports a very prominent and diverse Indian popular music scene, from neo-bhangra groups such as Achanak and XLNC, to mixers such as Bally Sagoo and Calvin Singh, rap acts like Apache Indian, Fun^Da^Mental, Kaliphz, and Asian Dub Foundation, and mainstream pop bands such as Cornershop and Echobelly. North America supports a diverse new Indian music scene as well, but it remains at present more at the underground level. Naturally, the cities with the largest Indian populations support the largest Indian popular music scenes; thus, while distinct in its character, the scene in Chicago is not as large as in Toronto or New York.

The Desi Music Scene

The word desi is taken from the Hindi deśi, meaning “from the country,” or in effect, “homeboy” or “homegirl.” In North America, “desi music” is a general term used by young Indo-Americans to describe primarily diasporic South Asian music, especially modern dance genres. Chicago desi DJs informed me that the term has arisen only in recent years,
becoming particularly popular in Chicago. The promoters of Desi Music Vibes, one sponsor of a recent Chicago concert by British star Apache Indian, were frequently asked by British Indians what exactly they meant by desi music. Even in Chicago, I was given somewhat different definitions by different DJs. Some included all South Asian-derived/influenced music under the term, and some separated Punjabi-derived music (i.e., bhangra) from Hindi-derived music, which they considered to be desi.

Here, desi music is used to refer to both bhangra-beat and Hindi remixes (basically combining Hindi film songs with hip-hop and house beats), both of which originate in Britain. In studying this music, it is necessary to navigate through many vague and often overlapping stylistic categories, including bhangra, remixes, house, hip-hop, techno, club, jungle, drum’n’bass, euro, and many others.7 Bhangra, which would seem to be the best defined of these idioms, is the term perhaps the most abused. Due in part to imprecise media journalism, bhangra is widely used to describe all contemporary South Asian dance music in Britain and America, regardless of whether or not it contains any reference to the Punjabi folk genre. There has been a swifter separation of the term bhangra from Hindi remixes in Chicago, as the latter are more popular than the former. In Britain, New York, and Toronto, it is bhangra which is more popular.

Another terminological inconsistency is found in reference to “traditional” bhangra. “Traditional” is often added to describe bhangra, referring only to its heritage, and not whether or not it is recently produced or has a Western dance beat. Thus, what many, including DJs, call traditional bhangra, may in fact be bhangra-beat or house-bhangra. DJ Surreal Sunil explained to me that to him, “traditional bhangra” refers to originally-composed music with a bhangra or bhangra-beat rhythm, and not simply a remix of existing produced music. Thus in this context, most British bhangra would be labeled as traditional.

The acceptance by the Indian community of desi music as reflective of their “tradition” is significant considering it has sometimes few Indian references. Those Indian artists trying to appeal to a mainstream market, such as British star Apache Indian, have over time de-emphasized Indian rhythms for Western dance beats (Gopinath 1995:319). Maira (1999:50) posits that young Indian-Americans, although partaking of such hybrid popular culture, often consider it to be “diluted” or less authentically Indian. My own interviews, however, point more towards the position that Indian-Americans, rather than rejecting increased hybridity, find such music even more accurately representative of their hyphenated identities -- that is, desi music must represent both the Indian and the Western. Mishra reminds us that the diasporic space of the border, “a space that is always contaminated” (1996:433), is particularly congenial to such hybridities. The issue of authenticity is further complicated by the basis of Hindi remixes in heavily
Westernized Indian film music. Even in cases where hybrid diasporic Indian music is considered to be inauthentic, film music, by far the predominant Indian musical genre consumed by Indian diaspora communities, is considered authentic (by some youth, even “traditional”). Especially as diasporic genres return to the homeland to assert further influence, issues of authenticity become increasingly complex.

Interestingly, while an outside observer might easily describe this music as Indianized Western music, it was considered by those I interviewed to be Westernized Indian music -- DJs repeatedly emphasized that Hindi film songs or bhangra songs with Western dance beats were still essentially Indian. The primary elements of the music, in their minds, are the singing, the tune, i.e. the Indian samples, while the beat is considered secondary and subordinate to the tune. DJ Snay expressed that:

meaning is more in the words than the beat. Music and words are the same... whatever beat goes underneath, its just like a person, you know, a person puts on makeup, it doesn’t change them, just makes them look better... it depends how much makeup, or beat, how good it is.

The rationale given by some DJs for the necessity of American dance beats was that although they are playing essentially Indian music, the dance club context requires a stronger beat than that provided in the original songs. Thus the beats in desi music (contrary to the multitude of musical genres which are quintessentially defined by their underlying rhythms), while fundamental to its feel, are not seen as defining its basic identity.

The issue of relationships between Indian-American youth and Indian versus Western culture tempts me to adapt to this case Turino’s revealing concept of the “twin paradoxes” of nationalist movements (Turino: in press), an adaptation which may have broader significance to other diaspora communities and to the relation between nationalist and diaspora consciousness.8 The twin paradoxes of diasporic identity are that on the one hand, in this case, Indian-American youth require and are dependent on what they perceive as “authentic” or “traditional” homeland culture -- it constitutes their sense of heritage, and distinguishes them as unique from other Americans. Yet at the same time, they are threatened by their homeland heritage, for example by stereotypes projected on them because of it, or by restrictive customs with which they do not agree. On the other hand, these youth, as Americans, require and depend on American/Western culture as a significant aspect of their identity, while they are simultaneously threatened by the possibility of losing their distinctiveness and their heritage.
Indian-American youth also attempt to resolve these paradoxes in a manner similar to Turino’s model for nationalist movements. Turino states that nationalists balance these paradoxes’ dependencies and threats through a process of modernist reformism, which creates projects based on the idea that ‘a new culture,’ or new genres, styles, and practices should be forged as a synthesis of the ‘best’ or ‘most valuable’ aspects of local ‘traditional’ culture and ‘the best’ of foreign ‘modern’ lifeways and technologies. . . Put more directly, reformism typically objectifies, recontextualizes, and alters indigenous forms for emblematic purposes in light of cosmopolitan dispositions and social contexts and programs. (in press)

Indian-American youth have constructed their musical forms in precisely this manner. For the first time, a style was created that these youth could truly call their own, interweaving Indian and American life experience through music. American popular music encompassed part of who they were, but did not take into account the heritage which manifested every day within their own community. Indian popular music, on the other hand, was by itself too inappropriate, too conservative, not American enough; indeed, not “cool” enough. Desi music fulfilled this need by creating a space for American formal and social structures with just the right amount of Indianness. More than one Indian-American glossed desi music as “the best of both worlds.”

The American social mode serving as a base for desi culture is the dance party. The unsupervised, co-ed, alcohol-serving, late-night dance club party is a major break from traditional Indian culture to say the least, one that many of these youths’ parents bemoan. Yet if, as Americans, their children must participate in American youth debauchery, parents object less to desi dance parties than regular clubs -- they are perhaps the least of all evils. For at least at desi parties, members of the young generation, in danger of total American assimilation, are surrounded by other Indians and are contributing to the maintenance of the Indian community.

In addition to generally supporting the Indian community, desi parties serve at least two specific functions within that community. The first is that desi parties provide a venue in which young Indians can meet large numbers of other young Indians of the opposite sex. While the occurrence of arranged marriage is unusual in the American environment, the tendency for Indian-Americans to intermarry is still very strong. Some party organizers suggested to me that the possibility of meeting a mate, more than to dance to desi music, is the primary reason many come to the parties (something probably true of all club scenes). Frith explains that for youth, “music probably has the most important role in the mapping of social
networks, determining how and where they meet and court and party” (1992:177).

The second function for the community is that desi dance parties provide integrative venues for South Asians of highly heterogeneous backgrounds. While Maira speaks of desi parties as spaces where regional identities are (sometimes violently) claimed, all of the youth with whom I spoke agreed that the desi social scene (as well as their personal groups of Indian friends) is highly inclusive of different regional, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, serving to bond rather than oppose these groups. Fights sometimes do break out at Chicago desi parties; upon inquiring if these fights had regional or religious underpinnings, however, the answer was always in the negative. Chicago desi party fights seem only to be instigated by perceived threats to individual machismo (which Maira acknowledges as a partial cause) and not to “regional jingoism” (Maira 1999:43).

Rather, desi parties create an arena for the integration of scattered parts of the Indian community, providing Indian youth with broader sense of its scope. Several insiders described the sense of unity that these parties evoke, interspersing on the dance floor members of ethnic or religious groups that contest each other in the homeland. Shirin Housee says of the Indo-British music scene that “It speaks a language whether you’re from Mauritius, Pakistan, India and so on” (Housee and Dar 1996:91). Such unity is necessary in diaspora communities, in order for marginalized minorities to consolidate their social and cultural power. Desi parties, important sites for such consolidation, provide empowering experiences for these youth: minorities in their daily lives, they enter a space where with hundreds, even thousands of their peers, they perform and assert their cultural legitimacy.

The desi music sound is itself conducive to pan-Indian identity: the emphasis on Hindi film songs, popular throughout India and across the diaspora, inherently mark such an identity. Even the presence of the regional genre bhangra has become a site of pan-Indian identification (discussed below). One South Indian DJ explained that his South Indians friends enjoy desi music as much as anyone, even though it is sung in Hindi or Punjabi. Language comprehension is not an issue here; song lyrics are far more meaningful as non-semantic indices of Indianness than as semantic texts, which only a small minority understand. I do not wish to imply that Indian-Americans do not feel regional affiliations, simply that these do not seem a salient aspect of the desi scene. Homeland regional identity might be strong in an individual’s family or within a regional sub-community, while desi parties represent a broader Indian heritage, using widely popular Hindi films as a common denominator.
The Chicago Desi Sound

To reiterate, desi music is essentially comprised of bhangra-beat and Hindi remixes. Hindi remixes are created similarly to bhangra-beat, differing primarily in the use of Indian film songs as the primary tonal material (although often including samples from popular club music as well), and in the lack of the characteristic bhangra drumming patterns. In bhangra, the rhythms are amplified or electronically reproduced, allowing them to be foregrounded in the music. Although sometimes supplemented by Western hip-hop or house beats, the bhangra rhythm is the center of the music. Contrastingly, Hindi remixes de-emphasize the drumming of the original film songs, either minimizing it through equalization (i.e., cutting out certain lower frequencies), or simply allowing it to be drowned out beyond audibility by the extremely forceful house beat. While Hindi remixes occur in a number of quasi-styles of underlying groove (hip-hop, house, club, techno, etc.), in Chicago it is house, an upbeat, monotonous rhythm on programmed electronic drums, which is overwhelmingly popular.

Figure 2: Basic house beat

\[ J = 125 - 140 \]

hi-hat: 11

\[ \text{bass drum:} \]

House music developed in Chicago, comprising a significant underground dance music scene by the mid to late 1980s, and quickly became widely popular, especially in Britain (Larkin 1995). This is significant, for the Chicago house style strongly influenced early Indian remix records coming out of the UK in the late 1980s. Therefore a cyclical course of musical influence has developed whereby New York hip-hop and Chicago house influenced new Indo-British dance genres, which then returned to these cities as models for Indo-American dance music scenes. Desi music started gaining considerable popularity in New York and Toronto around 1991-1992, and in Chicago around 1993-1994. 12

In Toronto and New York, the most popular style is a blend of hip-hop, reggae “toasting” (rapping), and bhangra; 13 the style, for example, of England’s Apache Indian. This mix is logical, considering Toronto’s large Indo-Trinidadian population, the large Caribbean population in New York, and both cities’ large Punjabi communities. House-based music does not
play as large a role. Conversely, this rap/reggae/bhangra style is not as popular in Chicago, where there are fewer Punjabis (the Gujarati population is most prominent). Similarly, bhangra itself is much more prominent in New York and Toronto than in Chicago, where it plays an appreciated but limited role compared to the much more popular Hindi film remixes. The reception of Apache Indian at a 1998 concert in Chicago was lukewarm, not only because of his musical style, but in part due to his use of a live band in a context where crowds expect the kind of electronic repetitive dance beats that only pre-produced music can provide. Several DJs discussed the conservative stylistic expectations of Chicago desi party crowds. House is now considered relatively mainstream; more sonically and rhythmically complex current underground styles like rave, jungle, and drum’n’bass are not prominent at Indian parties. House is considered the easiest to dance to because of its relative simplicity and appropriate tempo, but equally important is the embeddedness of house music in the Chicago club scene and the embeddedness of Chicago in these youths’ identities; as DJ Raj explained, “people are used to the beat structure of house.”

Bhangra, although it has special resonance to Punjabis, has become in all these cities an emblem for pan-Indian identity and “tradition,” to which a wide range of Indo-Americans respond. The primary reason stated for this is bhangra’s driving rhythms, traditionally played by the dhol and dholki (low and high-pitched drums, respectively):

**Figure 3: Sample Bhangra Rhythm**

\[
\text{dholki: } \begin{array}{c|c|c|c|c|c|c} 
\mid & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot \\
\mid & & & & & & \\
\end{array}
\]

\[
\text{dhol: } \begin{array}{c|c|c|c|c|c|c} 
\mid & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot & \cdot \\
\mid & & & & & & \\
\end{array}
\]

eighth notes are “swung” towards a triplet feel

This rhythm has a strong danceable quality conducive to dance clubs. When DJs mix bhangra, they usually use this traditional rhythm, amplified and electronically reproduced. Mixers also often subordinate bhangra rhythms to house, techno, or hip-hop beats, but this style is not popular in Chicago. Chicago DJs, when they do play bhangra, tend to leave the bhangra rhythm at the forefront, for they play the genre sparingly, and want it to have an effect as “traditional.” In other words, while areas with large Punjabi communities mix bhangra with dance grooves as an expression of daily cultural existence, in Chicago bhangra is seen as more “exotic,” serving as a link to their imagining of deep Indian tradition.
Curiously, other South Asian folk dance genres have not been used to create dance club music. For example, it would seem probable that garba, a regional music/dance genre from Gujarat, would be used to create hybrid dance styles in Chicago, where Gujaratis are prominent. Garba is played by DJs who work Gujarati social functions such as weddings and anniversaries, but only in its original form -- it is never subjected to dance club beats. DJ Lomesh, of Gujarati descent, explained to me that garba was "nothing hip to get into" like bhangra, which he described as much more "upbeat." Another important point is that many regional styles, including garba, are associated with religious celebrations, unlike the secular bhangra, and there is reluctance even by young Indians to associate these genres with the atmosphere of sexuality and inebriation at dance parties. Bhangra, on the other hand, they view as intrinsically closer to the party ethos.

Desi DJs

Before the advent of desi parties, Indian DJs in Chicago worked private Indian social functions such as weddings, anniversaries, birthdays, and sweet sixteen parties. Large social gatherings for such occasions, with the presence of music, are common in the Indian community, and trace back to similar practices in India. Formerly, music at such occasions was provided by a live band playing mostly film songs and light music (Geldard:1981), but today, these have been entirely replaced by DJs, who are cheaper, have greater versatility, and play the original recordings that the crowd knows and loves. For younger patrons, the music might also include American popular music (the primary music they grew up with), and perhaps some lighter Hindi remixes.

Although many DJs still work private social functions, the most popular ones work only large-scale Indian dance parties organized, promoted, executed, and attended by young Indians. The music at desi dance parties is all dance remixes, although certain Indian DJs might in fact play mostly or entirely American music. Ironically, only certain Chicago desi party DJs have reputations for playing a lot of Hindi remixes, and even fewer for playing bhangra. DJs are very attuned to the needs of the crowd, and until the last couple years, there was limited support for desi music. Over the last few years, however, as its popularity has risen, desi music is increasingly expected by audiences, and its presence at Chicago desi parties has risen in proportion to American club music.

Most DJs rely entirely upon released recordings of house and club music, and remixes made by other DJs; a few, however, create remixes themselves. Some rarely even "perform" at parties at all, content just to produce the music that other DJs use. Making remixes involves choosing
popular Hindi film songs, readily available at numerous Indian music/video shops, and overlaying these with house music (from a CD or LP record) and sometimes other sound bytes of talking, American popular music, or other sources. These are then mixed on a multi-track tape recorder, or now more often a computer (with a multi-track recording and editing program), and burned onto a master CD from which both CDs and cassettes can be copied. There are only a handful of DJs in Chicago that produce their own remixes -- most are made in New York and Toronto. Some Chicago DJs produce their own tapes and CDs simply by pulling Indian remixes from different sources and stringing segments together into a “hot mix.”

Only a few years ago, there were few Indian remix DJs and parties, but the recent popularity of desi music and desi parties has created a proliferation of DJs who compete for employment and popularity. When I asked certain DJs about others in town, the competition between them became apparent. Many DJs gave me the impression that they were one of only a few people in town that play Indian music, or that when they started, they were practically the first. In the true spirit of hip-hop rappers, putting down other DJs was prevalent. Competition over price was one issue, with the general feeling that substandard DJs lowered their price and lowered standards. Similarly, DJs who had reputations of being “in it for the money” rather than “the love of it,” were also disrespected. Desi Music Vibes promoters Raj and Bnoy explained to me that they sometimes in fact lose substantial sums at desi events; while they hope to eventually profit, they are more concerned at this point with building the quality and the unity of the Chicago desi scene.

Musical criticisms were usually based on some (other) DJ’s alleged lack of ability to feel out and meet the needs of the crowd, which seemed to be the most esteemed attribute of a good live DJ. DJs who typically play only a set program, prepared at home, were low in status. The artistry lies in feeling out the desires of the crowd, then making transitions from one piece to the next (be it Hindi remix, bhangra, or American club music) flawlessly. Transitions between pieces are made by matching the tempos of the beats from one song to another, using the pitch control on DJ equipment (CD mixers and turntables) to adjust the tempo. Like the creation of remixes themselves (at home or in a studio), this live process is also referred to as mixing. The necessity that desi DJs meet the desires of the crowd ensures that this music will remain constantly fluid and vital, shifting with the tides of popular music, changing radically even over short periods of time. This can be seen in contrasting styles of desi music played at eighteen-and-over parties and at twenty-one-and-over parties. Though only a few years separate the two groups, DJs must meet their significantly different tastes.
Conclusion

The desi music scene, arising only in recent years, has become an epicenter for the creation and mediation of Indian-American youth consciousness. From the extremely heterogeneous regional, religious, social, and cultural Indian heritages of these youth, desi music has been vital in the formation of an integrated Indian-American youth community. This unity should be distinguished from an externally-imposed “sameness” constructed by the homogenizing view of non-Indians; Tölöyan points out how “loosely related populations possessed of many different, locally circumscribed identities in their homelands, but regarded as ‘one’ in the hostland, can be turned into a diaspora by the gaze of that hostland” (Tölöyan 1996:13). This formulation, however, does not take into account the internal construction of diaspora identity—the need for unity in order to protect further loss of identity under the homogenizing “gaze” of the dominant culture.

This study has no intention of portraying Indo-American youth identity as a singular entity; rather, it is important to bear in mind the complex identities of these youth, for they are not only Indian-American, but as a “new” Indian diaspora group must be both Indian and American, and both sides can be defined in infinite ways.17 Certainly not all Indian-American youth are involved with the desi scene, and for those that do, it composes only a portion of their social lives. Even those who associate predominantly with other Indians lead, the majority of the time, social lives akin to other middle-class American youth. Desi music for many serves an important role; but for example, when I asked one desi DJ if he planned to attend an Apache Indian concert that evening, he replied, “I’m not really in the mood to go stand with another 1500 Indians.”

Yet, rather than increasingly assimilating into the general populace, most young Indians, who have always been immersed in their American identity, are more and more strengthening their sense of Indian identity. For these youth, desi music and its social contexts are perhaps the primary space for this negotiation. As Rahul Sharma of the fusion band Funkadesi admitted, “I completely blended in before I became conscious of being Indian” (Dhenjan 1995). DJ Sunny Singh explained, “I grew up with only whites. In many ways, I believed that I was white, but in reality I wasn’t. . . [now] I use music to express myself” (ibid.).

DJ Raj (of promoters Desi Music Vibes) explained that in the beginning, they had trouble bringing their peers together for Indian parties, and that it was only recently that many Indians in Chicago were interested in desi music: for years “it was really tough to bring those people out and say, ‘we can have our own scene, our own identity’.” Raj and many others
expressed that young Indian-American's Indian consciousness is much stronger than it used to be. Large-scale Indian parties now occur in Chicago regularly. Where young Indians had been dependent exclusively on American music in their social lives, they have become more and more supportive of desi music for social and cultural representation. Many do not understand the Hindi or Punjabi lyrics of the songs and many may rarely if ever go to India, but at Indian dance parties, they are at least able to tap into the desi vibe. The song lyrics, like the musical sound itself, convey primarily non-representational indexical and affective meaning; that is, the songs are detextualized and contextualized, with the value of homeland imagination superceding semantic value.

The formulation of desi music has been inherently diasporic. It serves the dual function of bringing together diverse groups of South Asians within a particular diasporic community, and providing a cosmopolitan expressive form which maintains links with desi communities in diverse locations, becoming the common language shared by all. Desi music also helps maintain the diasporic relationship with the homeland through the use of current Hindi film songs, which along with websites, magazines, and satellite media (including a booming 24-hour satellite-broadcast MTV India), allow Indian-Americans to be continually informed about what is hot in Indian popular culture. This emphasizes the great impact of global capitalism and technology for strengthening diasporic links.

In a sense the desi music scene, by creating contexts for the community to bond, operates as a diasporic extension of traditional extended family relationships. Similarly, desi parties serve, as party organizers are quite conscious, as venues for desis to meet suitable mates. At the very least, desi music serves the function of producing a sense of "neighborhood" through, to quote Appadurai, "the continuous construction, both practical and discursive, of an ethnoscape (necessarily nonlocal) against which local practices and projects are imagined to take place" (Appadurai 1996:184), leading to "the production of locality as a structure of feeling" (ibid.:181). In Chicago, Hindi-house remixes structure feelings which produce the Indo-Chicago locality.

Desi music currently contributes significantly to the ongoing process of identity formation among Indian youth. Typical definitions of identity, Singer explains, include conveying "the feeling of personal continuity and consistency within oneself" (Singer 1984:156). Continuity and consistency, however, are not prominent traits of pluralistic "post-modern" societies. Indian-American youth are continually trying to find the balance between worlds -- for them, like all of us, continuity of identity must be constructed, and it is the continuity between these worlds that desi music represents. Fortunately, Indian culture, like American culture, is
particularly adept at musical and social syntheses, for cultural diversity and hybridity have always been a prominent aspect of South Asian history.

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Notes

1 The research for this project was conducted in the Chicago area and in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois intermittently throughout most of 1998. The statements presented here are concluded from interviews with fourteen desi DJs and several dozen desi party attendees and other community members.

2 The U.S., Canada, East Africa, Fiji, Mauritius, Surinam, Guyana, and Trinidad (and to a lesser degree some other Caribbean islands) have supported the largest migrations of Indians.

3 This phenomenon is, of course, widespread in musical performance contexts in America in general; however, the replacement of bands by DJs seems to be even more complete for Indian events than for those of the general populace.

4 Mostly from Hindi films, and associated by audiences as much with film stars who lip-sync the songs as with the music itself.

5 There is a correlation between the “underground” origins of both black house music and bhangra/desi-house in Chicago. House began, and desi music remains to a large degree, localized and restricted in terms of popularity, in effect an underground, minority music.

6 This is largely a male phenomenon, associated with a certain machismo--for a detailed account of gender dynamics in the desi subculture, see Maira 1999.

7 In all interviews, I inquired about definitions of these genres. Responses were consistently vague, and it seems the genres frequently overlap. Sorting out these dance beat styles must remain beyond the scope of this article.

8 Turino’s concept states that nationalist movements paradoxically are dependent on modernist ideologies of cosmopolitanism while being simultaneously threatened by them, in the possibility of losing their unique
identity as a nation. At the same time, nationalism is paradoxically dependent on its localized cultures, which portray its distinctiveness, while being threatened by local cultural groups, for as localism is celebrated, local groups may develop sentiments of separate national status.

9 The identity category of caste has ceased to be functional among Indian-American youth.

10 I did not collect detailed data regarding the regional distribution of the Chicago Indian community. I am aware that there is a large Gujarati population, and that there are relatively few South Indians compared to North Indians.

11 Or other high-frequency percussive sound.

12 These dates are derived from approximately corresponding opinions of fourteen Chicago desi DJs I interviewed. Several DJs felt the first important remix album of Hindi film songs was released by Britain's Bally Sagoo in 1994, entitled “Bollywood Flashback” [Columbia 4782022]. The remix music popular before that was bhangra-oriented.

13 Bhangra hereafter refers to modern dance-club styles, i.e., house bhangra and bhangra beat.

14 However, T.S. Soundz, the most influential Chicago desi group, is influencing the Indian remix scene internationally with the Chicago house sound. Touring nationally, and marketed internationally, they have affected the east coast hip-hop/bhangra/reggae sound with their house-oriented style.

15 The Hindi film songs chosen for remixing are usually newer popular songs, but may also use older “classics.”

16 Typically in desi music (as was initially true in hip-hop) there is little regard for copyright restrictions. DJs take other DJs’ work, just as the latter have taken the material to create their music. Generally this has no severe implications; because of its highly underground status, the music is marketed mainly at the local level and does not produce commercially significant revenue.

17 To reiterate Mishra’s distinction between “old” and “new” Indian diasporas (1996:422), the former is characterized by exclusivism, creating “relatively self-contained ‘little-Indias’ in the colonies,” while the latter are late capitalist “border” diasporas. I am inferring that “new” diasporas participate to a large degree in the mainstream host culture. Such is the case with post-1960s Indian immigrants, and especially with their children.
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