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Forging the New *Desi* Music: Transnational Identity and Musical Syncretism at a South Asian-American Festival

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For three days in late April of 2002, Hollywood, California, was home to Artwallah, a multimedia arts festival of the South Asian Diaspora. “Artwallah” essentially means “one who does art,” and over 65 artists and performers of South Asian heritage contributed their individual talents and distinctive voices to a collective expression that included dance, film, visual arts, theater, literature, stand-up comedy, and music. In addition to creating a temporary physical space conducive to the sharing of art and experience between participants and the audience, the festival also provided an ideological space that encouraged an inherently “hybrid” style of artistic expression. According to the festival program booklet, this body of work, “though rooted in South Asia, reflects the establishment of the home and the self in new lands.” Indeed, the tension between the ancestral homeland and the cultural mainstream of North America was a thread that ran consistently through every medium of expression at Artwallah, leading to unexpected collaborations with thoroughly moving results.

In this paper, I specifically examine the music performed at Artwallah 2002, and the snapshot it provides of the emerging trends of music production and consumption among South Asian-Americans—particularly the younger second generation. Not surprisingly, the music of second generation South Asian-Americans reflects this tension between cultural and national identity through various styles of music that couple South

Asian genres with the now global pop genres of hip hop and house, among others. It is my intention to query the relationship between these musical activities and the formation of a “hyphenated” cultural identity, such as “Indian-American,” or the more colloquial “*Desi*-American.” As this new *Desi*-American music searches for its voice, it both reflects and contributes to a maturing transnational identity among people of South Asian heritage in the complex sociopolitical context of North America.

Billed as an “arts festival of the South Asian diaspora,” Artwallah has been an annual event in Los Angeles since 1999, and attracts musicians, performers, and artists from all over North America.¹ The South Asian diaspora, born largely out of the 19th century British system of indenture, is today geographically disparate, but increasingly linked through the cultural flow of mass media, and the movement of people twice and thrice migrated. Although the South Asian presence in the U.S. and Canada is by in large more recent than that in the countries of indentureship, its history is no less rich in its complexity and no less globally interconnected. Artwallah, therefore, is well positioned both geographically and ideologically to offer a particular vantage point on the dynamic contours of the South Asian ethnoscape—that flux of people moving through a deterritorialized world, which Arjun Appadurai elaborates as “landscapes of identity” (1991: 191).

Organized by well-educated artist/activists, Artwallah has evolved an ideological position that emphasizes identity politics. Along these lines, Shilpa Agarwal, a founding member of Artwallah said in a radio interview: “The art that’s at Artwallah speaks to migration...the shifting of identities, [and] the breaking and re-making of traditions. The

issues are very common to immigrant populations, and those issues find a voice at Artwallah.”² One of the initial catalysts for the genesis of Artwallah was the realization that South Asian American artists lacked a centralized platform to showcase their creative material, which, according to Agarwal, tends to engage issues of cultural syncretism. However, the scholar Bakirathi Mani suggests that this foregrounding of identity politics has been coupled with an unproblematized notion of “South Asian” and homeland. I quote her at length: “By encouraging a form of cultural politics based on individual expression of personal identity, Artwallah fosters a mythical notion of ‘South Asia’: A South Asia that refers not to a real place of origin or geo-political location of politics, but to a common racial denominator of U.S. citizenship” (2001: 12).

Mani’s comment returns us to the geographic position of Artwallah, which is squarely within the political sweep of the U.S. nation-state, although here too cartographic borders are blurred by the global reach of American politics and pop cultural give and take. Still, the actual “on the ground” experiences of Americans of South Asian descent in 2002 occurred in a sociopolitical context colored by several phenomena, including the following. First, Asians in general and South Asians in particular have been branded as a “model minority,” a dubious status that stereotypes South Asians as politically impotent career professionals (see Prashad, 2000). This perception is based partly on the statistical fact that Indian-Americans are one of the most affluent minority groups in the U.S., second only to Japanese-Americans, and comprise 5% of all doctors, scientists, engineers, and software specialists even though they make up less than 1% of the total U.S. population (Lal, 1996: 139). The two primary elements of the model minority trap, economic viability and an a-political mentality, operate a subtle pressure

on South Asian Americans who choose to enter the economically dangerous and often politically expressive world of music. However, by the time Artwallah 2002 commenced, the model minority image had been put into tension with another sociopolitical phenomenon, the post-September 11 climate of racial profiling and violence. In fact, many of these incidences of violence highlighted the flip-side of the model minority image: working class South Asian-Americans, such as taxi drivers and shop clerks, were the most vulnerable to attacks. There was a sense among many Artwallah participants that South Asians had to re-establish their visibility, and re-claim their place in a society that had become clouded by fear, ignorance, and mistrust.

A third issue concerns what is sometimes referred to as “cultural imperialism,” in this case the appropriation by mainstream America of surface “Indianess.” By the mid-1990s, South Asian cultural elements had begun to (re)enter Western pop culture, including *mehndi* hand designs (ex. Madonna) and elaborate *bindis*, or forehead ornaments (ex. Gwen Stefani, and once again Madonna). This kind of cultural appropriation is, of course, political, and its description at the hands of cultural theorists has shifted, significantly, from “Indo-*chic*” to the “New Orientalism” (see Maira 2000). More recently, South Asian music has been the source for Western pop music appropriation, including the use of a Lata Mangeshkar film song in the R&B hit “Addictive” by Truth Hurts, which was popular at the time of the festival. The reaction to these kinds of borrowings among the South Asian community has been mixed, although in cases where copyright is an issue, the abused parties have not been slow to take action.

The music performed at Artwallah, as stated earlier, was often self-consciously demonstrative of both “South Asian” and “Western” elements, in terms of both musical sounds and styles. While this kind of musical syncretism is part of a continuum dating back at least to the collaborations of Ravi Shankar in the 1960s, it is distinguished here by the fact that it is a creation of the second-generation of South-Asians in North America—that generation in their teens or twenties that self-identify as *desis* born in America or Canada.³ This is also the generation that produces and consumes the so-called “New Desi music,” a club music that re-mixes imported Bhangra and Hindi film songs with hip hop, house, and techno.⁴ Like many youth sub-cultures in North America and around the world, South Asian Americans tend to demonstrate a taste for the hip hop aesthetic, especially in urban areas (see Maira, 1998). This sentiment is expressed succinctly by Ram Sampath, a DJ active in New Delhi: “Black is the new white; kids around the world love hip hop” (Takahashi, 2003: 98). It is therefore no surprise that hip hop culture figures into the *desi* fusions so prominently. Although the South Asian DJ reigned supreme in the 1990s, evidence suggests that South Asian musician-performers may be the face of South Asian-American music for the current decade. Many of these musicians and groups are supported by new grassroots record labels such as Six Degrees Records in San Francisco and Rukus Avenue Records in Los Angeles.

There were five primary musical performers or groups present at Artwallah 2002, namely the Oliver Rajamani Ensemble, Gurpreet Chana and Jugular, Sumeet Bharati, Grounded, and Karmacy. Oliver Rajamani explored the musical trail of the Rom (or Gypsy) people through his vocal compositions accompanied by the *sarod*, the *ud*, or the Flamenco guitar. He headed a small, eclectic ensemble that included Afro-Cuban

drumming, percussion, and electric bass. Gurpreet Chana, from Toronto, played *tabla*, a pair of drums from North India, and he brought 21 years of experience to the instrument. He could play a variety of musical styles in addition to the Hindustani rhythm canon, and he teamed up with Jugular, a beat-box artist extraordinaire and fellow Indo-Canadian. Sumeet Bharati was an R&B singer, and Grounded was a quartet from the Bay area featuring Sanskrit chanting in a pop-rock format. Finally, Karmacy was a hip hop group of South Asian descent, local to Los Angeles, who rap in Panjabi and Gujurati in addition to English. Taken together, the musicians presented a very eclectic image of South Asian-American musical expression, one that explored, to quote Stuart Hall, “not the so-called return to roots, but a coming-to-terms-with ‘our routes.’” (1996: 4).

To return to the relationship between music and identity, Mark Slobin has suggested that music is such a potent variable in a transnational setting largely due to its paradoxical nature of rootedness and flexibility (1994). Music is both deeply evocative of the homeland connections of family, politics, and memory, and highly viable as an agent in cultural preservation or assimilation in a diasporic setting. Of course, notions of “homeland” and familial connections abroad become complicated when dealing with music production and consumption by second generation immigrants, some of whom may never have traveled outside of North America. Still, it remains that the particular way that music intersects the *traditional/rootedness/South Asian* with the *innovative/flexible/American* gives it a certain currency unique among cultural variables. The propensity for musical syncretism demonstrated by the musical groups at Artwallah

showcases this negotiation between the (seemingly) binary oppositions of tradition and modernity, parents and children, and East and West.

My interviews with musicians tapped into a discourse on music and identity that seemed to be in the air at Artwallah. Speaking generally of the festival, Jason Ranjit Parmar said, “People are redefining themselves...it’s an opportunity for us to find out who we are through artistic expression, creative expression, through meeting each other, and hearing each other.” Jason, who plays drums for Grounded and is currently studying *tabla* at the Ali Akbar College of Music, devised a way to attach his *tabla* set to his conventional Western drum kit, so that he can play the *tablas* while seated at the kit. He said of this union: “It was like fusing these different parts of my identity—different parts of my background and my culture together.” Gurpreet Chana, meanwhile, has fused his *tabla* skills with those of beat-boxing friend Jugular. Beat-boxing is the art of creating beats and sound effects using only one’s mouth and hands as resonators. Their collaboration is called, appropriately enough, “Ta-beat-la.” Gurpreet noted that some people fear that fusion music may threaten the survival of traditional or Classical forms of music. He counters this argument by stating that the original Indian music is “so beautiful and so pure that you really can’t take anything away from it. You can only help to enhance it and beautify it even more by incorporating your experiences into it.” Oliver Rajamani, who has spent a great deal of his life making music with communities along the so-called Gypsy Trail, said simple, “My music is the sounds of the experiences I’ve had.” Oliver played three different lutes, each indicative of another stop on the Gypsy Trail: the North Indian *sarod*, the Middle Eastern *Ud*, and the Flamenco guitar. However, the geographical symbolism of these instruments was blurred by Oliver’s flare

for challenging the borders of national musics. For example, he performed a traditional Tamil (South Indian) folk song in a seamless Flamenco style. He said, “I don’t identify myself with any one race, religion, or culture—I don’t like boxes.” Finally, all four members of Karmacy: S. Ceez, KB, Swap, and Nimo, are self-described “Hip hop heads,” who were listening to predominantly African American hip hop long before it occurred to them to rap about sarods and samosas. KB told me: “I’ve been asked a lot of times, ‘why are you trying to rap?’...I grew up around hip hop, it’s what I know. If I have an artistic desire to express something, hip hop is the only vehicle I know how to do it with.”

Returning once more to Arjun Appadurai—and to conclude—we find that the formula of hyphenation (as in Indian-American) is “reaching the point of saturation, and the right-hand side of the hyphen [American] can barely contain the unruliness of the left-hand side [Indian]” (1993: 424). This “unruliness” reflects the fact that India can no longer be conceived as a “nation” in this formula, but rather has become a “transnation,” a diasporic collectivity with an ideological link to a place of origin. This collectivity joins others in the U.S., which is engaged not so much as a monolithic nation-state, but as a “federation of diasporas,” to borrow Appadurai’s phrase. It is interesting to note that the weakening of the nation-state (both home and host) as a source for identity, has not completely discouraged essentialist notions of Indian or American identity. As mentioned earlier, it could be argued that much of the creative expression at Artwallah, including the music, was based on a relatively unproblematic vision of South Asia, or India in particular. This image, whether used as a foil for consonance or dissonance,

generally held up India as a homeland, reliable in its immutable “Indianess” and familiar in its cultural symbolism. To quote Anil Gupta and James Ferguson, “the irony of these times...is that as *actual places and localities* become ever more blurred and indeterminate, *ideas* of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient” (1992: 10. Emphasis in the original). This transnational paradox reveals the hyphen to be a conduit for discernment as “Indian” is reconciled with “American” through the creativity of the productive imagination. At the Artwallah festival, this imaginative creativity was audible in the syncretic musical styles performed by the musicians—styles that were at once uniquely individual and indicative of the greater South Asian American experience.

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¹ “South Asian” implies descent from the nation-states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and other locations in the South Asian diaspora. In the context of North America, this term is often replaced by “Indian-American” due to the overwhelming majority status of immigrants originating from that country.

² This quote by S. Agarwal was taken from the radio broadcast with S. Kolhatkar listed in the References Cited.

³ *Desi*, a word common to many North Indian languages, originally meant “from my country,” and its use by second generation South Asian-Americans is colloquial. It is sometimes defined as the “Hindi version of homeboy or homegirl” (Sengupta 1996: 1).

⁴ Bhangra, originally a Punjabi folk music (and dance), was transformed in the South Asian diaspora setting of the U.K. beginning in the 1970s. Traditional percussion instruments were retained as electronic instruments were added, forming a new genre called “Bhangra-pop,” which was itself fused with house and techno electronic dance music styles in the late 1980s and 90s.