CHAPTER 3
BRITISH ASIAN IDENTITY AND ITS BANGLADESHI MARGINS

By the summer of 1999, British Asian popular musicians had reached the peak of their commercial popularity in London. Several artists had released albums earlier that year, and their names circulated throughout the city as their albums and concerts were reviewed in mainstream media newspapers and magazines. The collective emergence into the mainstream of these British Asian popular musicians, along with other British Asian writers, actors, and visual artists, was celebrated as a breakthrough both within the British Asian community and general (white) British culture.

Ironically, this new exposure of British Asian identity, and its celebration in the press, presumed a type of cohesive British Asian “community” that did not actually exist. The term “British Asian” was applied to people who represented a wide variety of linguistic, regional, religious, national, and ethnic identities and socio-economic circumstances; it created a largely fictional fraternity among groups of people who, culturally, may not have had much in common. One such group is the immigrant population from Bangladesh. Their attempts to maintain and articulate a separate identity in music, in the face of being absorbed within a generic British Asian identity, will be the subject of this chapter.

While constructing a generic British Asian identity resulted in a marketable term that was both commercially and politically convenient, that singular construction threatened the preservation of specific British Asian identities, which more truthfully reflected the reality of diverse British Asian subcultures. The tension between generic British Asian identity and the more particular British Bangladeshi-Asian subculture may be traced in two events: Arts Worldwide’s Bangladesh Festival and the Whitechapel Gallery’s 000:
British Asian Cultural Provocation exhibition. Both events occurred simultaneously in July, 1999 in East London, specifically the ward of Spitalfields and Banglatown, where many British Bangladeshis have settled; and both events competed in their attempts to define British Asian identity. I attended events from both programs, and by their end, I had already experienced a profound disconnect between the media representations of the Asian Underground that had motivated my fieldwork on British Asian music in London in the first place, and what I actually found once I had arrived. This chapter serves as an effort to make sense of that discontinuity in British Asian identity.

While the Bangladesh Festival sought to celebrate specifically the traditional as well as the diasporic culture of the large Bangladeshi population in East London, the 000 exhibition showcased the work of three young British Asian avant-garde visual artists without calling attention to these artists’ different ethnic backgrounds—Bangladeshi, Punjabi, Gujarati, Sindhi, etc. In this way, and in contrast to the Bangladesh Festival, the 000 exhibit conveyed a sense of British Asian identity as singular and unified. Both events explicitly incorporated the participation of British Asian popular musicians into their activities, taking full advantage of their newfound popularity with the general British public.

As second generation, that is, diasporic musicians, British Bangladeshis musicians had grown up in a country that devalued their specific identity as Bangladeshi. Most British people were satisfied in knowing that they looked “Asian,” a racially defined stereotype that had positive connotations for political mobilization. The political evolution of British Asian identity provides a context for British Bangladeshis’ efforts to be recognized as Bangladeshis. Given that both Afro-Caribbeans and South Asians had been
similarly discriminated against by racially defined legislation, an alliance between the two, that is, a generic “black” identity, was a logical development and potent form of resistance during the 1970s and 1980s. As Avtar Brah has written, the term ‘black’ accomplished many goals simultaneously, but one of the most important things it did was to question the primacy of class over race in political critiques.\(^1\) The term “black” was intended to displace the categories “immigrant” and “ethnic minority,” both of which were associated with racially defined notions of cultural and political belonging, i.e. obstacles against the unified mobilization of Afro-Caribbean and South Asians in Britain.\(^2\)

By the late 1980s, the shared alliance of “blackness” attracted significant criticism. As some critics pointed out,

*When used in relation to South Asians the concept [“black”] is *de facto* emptied of those specific cultural meanings associated with phrases such as ‘black music.’ The concept can only incorporate South Asians in a political sense [that]... denies Asian cultural identity.*\(^3\)

Many scholars of Asian descent resented the usual exclusion of South Asian diasporic music from positive discussions of “black music.” For example, over the course of an entire chapter devoted to “Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity,” Paul Gilroy’s reference to and discussion of British Asian musicians is limited to the following brief, almost dismissive comments:

>In reinventing their own ethnicity, some of Britain’s Asian settlers have also borrowed the sound system culture of the Caribbean and the soul and hip hop styles of black America, as well as techniques like mixing, scratching, and sampling as part of the invention of a new mode of cultural production. The popularity of Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo’s


attempts to fuse Punjabi music with reggae music and ragamuffin raised debates about the authenticity of those hybrid cultures’ forms to an unprecedented pitch.⁴ Gilroy’s reference to British Asians’ “reinventing their own ethnicity” draws particular attention to the fact that contemporary British Asian sound culture is a relatively new development. Within this limited context, Gilroy’s reference suggests the sound system culture of the Caribbean and African American soul and hip styles from which British Asian culture draws its influences may be more authentic. Elsewhere Gilroy emphasizes that Caribbean and African American cultures are also the product of “hybrid” cultural processes in order to argue against ethnic essentialism within black cultures—rather than black cultures’ status in relation to other cultures.⁵

These types of exclusions suggested that British Asians did not “belong” as strongly to a “black” identity as did their Afro-Caribbean counterparts. Furthermore, the all-encompassing concept of “blackness” was instituted into official state discourse, which while a mark of its success and power, also led to its abuse. As the concept “black” entered official state discourse, instead of building solidarity between Afro-Caribbeans and South Asians, it began to pit them against one another as they competed for jobs in the state sector, as well as for state-allocated grants, services, and other resources.⁶ By the 1990s, many younger British Asians, many of who were too young to remember the struggles against racism during the 1970s and 1980s, were unlikely to identify with being “black.”

When the marketing slogan “brown is the new black” emerged at the end of the 1990s, it did not refer to this earlier politicized history; rather, it pointed to the fact that British Asian identity was now fashionable and

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⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 98.
conveniently marketable. The Whitechapel’s decision to hold the 000 exhibition and thus engage the local Bangladeshi population was somewhat expected as part of its community outreach obligations, but it also piggybacked on the fashionability of British Asian identity:

The decision, obviously fuelled by the *Brown is the new Black* school of thought, is suspect but has also been taken in the nick of time. Black Arts may be a dated concept which many artists dislike being associated with but exhibitions need themes, and artists need exposure.\(^7\)

In the quotation above, 2\(^{nd}\) *Generation* contributor Mo White explains the link between the marketing concept “Brown is the new Black” with the earlier more politicized notion of Black British Arts, and the history of “black” as a political and social category.\(^8\)

While Black British identity still had relevance, it influenced African-Caribbean and Asian artists, particularly those who were struggling to have their work recognized. Led by curators and artists including Keith Piper, Rasheed Araeen, Shaheen Merali, and Eddie Chambers, the Black British Arts Movement was developed in the early 1980s and signaled a political alliance between both Afro-Caribbean and British Asian artists, including Keith Piper, Chila Kumari Burman, and Shaheen Murali.\(^9\) The watershed exhibition

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featuring these artists, curated by Araeen, was *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, held at the Hayward Gallery (London) in 1989. Many younger British Asian artists in the 1990s, however, sought to distance themselves from the notion of Black British Art after it splintered into particular ethnicized identities, and as Black British culture distanced itself from including Asian identities altogether.

After the Black British alliance disintegrated, a few non-white artists attained prominence, and the distinct groups that remained for the most part abandoned their commitments to decreasing institutional racism in the art world. As Rasheed Araeen has noted,

> The struggle has been highjacked [sic]. With the success of the young breed of non-white artists, writers, and curators... the system has now built a thick wall of multiculturalism around it... What we are concerned here with are those activities whose success the system uses to camouflage its oppressive structures.

> The struggle now is not just against what some ‘black’ artists in Britain used to call ‘white institutions’, but with the system which now also includes black, brown, and yellow faces.

As Araeen notes, a few Afro-Caribbean and British Asian artists have now had their work exhibited in major spaces, and others have joined museums and galleries in administrative roles. Yet Araeen has critiqued what he considers to be their willing complicity in the perpetuation of institutional racism.

Araeen’s assessment of the “struggle” relates very closely to the disappointing

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11 See Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 96-102. On its curtailed use, Brah notes, “As a social movement, black activism has aimed to generate solidarity; it has not necessarily assumed that all members of the diverse black communities inevitably identify with the concept in its British usage.” Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 102.


13 Ibid.
outcome that many Afro-Caribbeans and British Asians faced after their struggles during the 1980s, a struggle that predicated itself on a shared sense of “black” identity.

The construction of British Asian identity during the late 1990s was one defined by emerging affluence, in light of Asian Chic (as discussed in the previous chapter). The glamour associated with some musicians’ jetsetting lifestyles bore only the faintest resemblance to the everyday lives of many younger British Bangladeshis whose own lives were more characterized by unemployment, a lack of access to education and other opportunities, racial discrimination, and other forms of social disadvantage. They were not “global Indians,” since most of them could not even afford to leave London, where they were born. In the early 1990s, Bangladeshis began to feel increasingly distant from a “British Asian” identity, which they associated more with Hindus and Sikhs—the “success stories and model minorities” who would later come to embody Asian Chic. Frustrated with their parents’ refusal to fight for better living conditions, many joined gangs, and others joined Islamic groups.

Bangladeshis in London have always had a unique history that only sometimes coincides with the narratives that describe the arrival of other South Asian immigrant groups such as Punjabis and Gujaratis. While their distance from the Asian Underground scene and majority Muslim faith would suggest that music was perhaps not a large part of their identity, in actuality, music was intrinsic to their identity—even if it was music that few people listened to outside their community. To understand the role of music in British Bangladeshi identity in the late 1990s, it is necessary to take into account the geopolitical history of the linguistic and cultural region called Bengal and the formation of the nation-state Bangladesh.
Bengal, Bangladesh, and the Construction of Musical Traditions

The terms “Bengali” and “Bangladeshi” are not entirely interchangeable, although they are often treated as such within the confines of London. The name “Bangladesh” in the Bengali language literally means “Bengal(i) country”, and the name thus obscures the fact that a significant number of Bengali speakers live in India, not Bangladesh, in the district of West Bengal. The differences that distinguish Bangladesh from Bengali culture have a complicated history.

The name “Bengal” refers to a region that today encompasses the country of Bangladesh, as well as the East Indian state of West Bengal. Since the late 19th and early 20th century, educated Bengalis had propagated nationalist rhetoric that was particularly influential throughout India. Given that Bengal threatened the stability of British rule in India, in 1905 Lord George Nathaniel Curzon decided to partition the Bengal province in order to govern the province more efficiently, and to “divide and conquer” by pitting Muslims against Hindus; he enticed poor Muslims to migrate to eastern Bengal with his claim that the establishment of a separate Muslim-majority province in eastern Bengal with Dhaka as its capital “would almost resurrect the lost glories of the Mughal Empire.”

Educated Bengalis, both Muslim and Hindu, were offended by Curzon’s partition because they took pride in a common language and culture. The Bengali people’s ensuing protest against Curzon’s decision is often recognized as the start of the swadeshi movement—the movement to boycott British cotton textiles and other consumer goods. Although the swadeshi movement was successful in that the Indian people’s

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15 Ibid., 120.
increasing self-sufficiency decreased their dependence on the British and negatively impacted the British economy, a few small groups took less moderate approaches and adopted violent methods.¹⁶

Within West Bengal, the cry “Bande Mataram” (“Hail to the Motherland”) resounded soon after the partition of Bengal, and it was soon adopted across India as a nationalist slogan. The words originated from lyrics appearing within a novel, Anandamath, by the Bengali author Bankim Chattopadhay. The lyrics’ and slogan’s popularity intensified after Rabindranath Tagore, already known as a composer of patriotic songs during this time, set these lyrics to music in the early 1900s. “Bande Mataram” implied that the whole region of Bengal was the Mother, but to those outside Bengal, “Mother” signified all of India. Nationalists across the country who adopted this cry participated in the swadeshi movement; they held rallies and bonfires of foreign goods and published nationalist petitions, newspapers, and posters.¹⁷

Taken as a patriotic cry on its own, “Bande Mataram” was still closely tied to the literary work in which it first appeared. Bankim had “imagined the land as the divine Mother, whose freedom from Muslim oppression would be secured by the militancy of her songs.”¹⁸ While “Bande Mataram” as an isolated refrain implied a unified Bengal -- if not India -- the nationalist movement was in fact instigated by upper class Hindus who were the most powerful political leaders during this time; the more vulnerable peasant class was primarily Muslim.¹⁹ Curzon’s partition had divided Bengal into two

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¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Ibid., 155. The Metcalfs include this translation of the opening lyrics of the song: “Mother, I bow to thee!/ Rich with thy hurrying streams,/ Bright with thy orchard gleams,/ Cool with thy winds of light,/ Dark fields waving, Mother of might,/ Mother free...”
¹⁹ Ibid.
provinces; West Bengal, home to 50 million, was united with Bihar and Orissa, and East Bengal, home to 31 million, was now united with Assam. After Curzon’s partition, many poorer Muslims migrated to the eastern provinces, where they felt they could better protect their own separate interests, distinct from those of the wealthier Hindus.20

The partition did not last for long, however. In 1911, King-Emperor George V became the only British monarch to set foot in India during the Raj when he attended the spectacular Coronation Durbar in Delhi, a massive ceremonial assemblage full of pageantry that affirmed British rule over India.21 During his visit, he announced the British intent to shift the capital of India from Calcutta, a hotbed of nationalist political activity, to a new capital, New Delhi, south of the old Mughal city associated with the glories of the Mughal Empire. George V also revoked the partition of Bengal; he gave Assam, Bihar, and Orissa separate status as provinces in themselves, reunited East and West Bengal, and raised Bengal to the status of a governor’s province, joining Madras and Bombay.22 Although Bengal was once again united, the migration of Muslims from the west to the east during the six years of separation had begun to create cultural distinctions between the two halves of the province. Following the independence of India in 1947, the ensuing partition of British India into largely Muslim Pakistan and largely Hindu India once again divided the region of Bengal. The Partition ceded West Bengal to India, and East Bengal to Pakistan. Thus East Bengal, now East Pakistan, was physically separated from West Pakistan by a number of Indian states. As a result of their

20 Ibid.
21 The durbars had taken place twice previously in 1877 and 1903. As Trevithick notes, Indians were believed to respond especially powerfully to ceremonial rituals associated with a royal presence; the durbars were intended to create favorable impressions of the royalty among the uneducated Indian public. Alan Trevithick, "Some Structural and Sequential Aspects of the British Imperial Assemblages at Delhi: 1877-1911," Modern Asian Studies 24, no. 3 (1990).
22 Metcalf and Metcalf, A Concise History of India, 155.
physical separation, tensions developed between the eastern and western halves of Pakistan.

From 1947 onwards, the Bengali population in East Pakistan resented what they felt to be their richer compatriots in West Pakistan, where the central government was positioned; they were also increasingly alienated by West Pakistan’s insistence on Urdu as the national language of Pakistan – to the exclusion of the Bengali language, which served as a particularly salient marker of their cultural differences from those in West Pakistan.  

In the 1960s, the people of East Pakistan began to mobilize for an autonomous Bengali state; while they formed over 50% of the total Pakistani population (East and West), they were not well represented in the “two main non-elected institutions of the state -- the military and civil bureaucracy.”

Pakistan citizens in East Bengal thus had due cause to be cautious of their counterparts in West Pakistan even before the violence that occurred on February 21,1952; on that day, Pakistani police fired upon a group of activists and students demonstrating to establish Bengali as an official state language alongside Urdu, which was more closely associated with West Pakistan. This relatively early incident marked the beginning of the independence movement in Bangladesh, which culminated in the War of Liberation in 1971. Suspicious of separatist activity, West Pakistan ordered a vicious military crackdown in March 1971. With the aid of the Indian Army, the East Pakistani Mukti Bahini

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23 Musicologist Karunamaya Goswami claims that immediately after India’s independence and partition, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the first leader of the Pakistani nation-state, revealed in public speeches that the population in West Pakistan (though fewer in number) intended to systematically exploit the population in East Pakistan (or East Bengal, which actually contained the larger number of people.) I have so far been unable to substantiate this claim through references to this incident in other sources. Karunamaya Goswami, "Music Regions: West Bengal and Bangladesh," in Garland Encyclopedia of World Music: The Indian Subcontinent, ed. Alison Arnold (Garland Publishing, 1999), 858.


25 Goswami, "Music Regions: West Bengal and Bangladesh," 858.
(Liberation Army) defeated the West Pakistani army in December 1971 to form the present-day country of Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{26}

Since gaining sovereignty, however, Bangladesh has had a tumultuous political history, which has wreaked havoc on its economy. Bangladesh’s first prime minister, Sheikh Mujibar Rahman (Mujib), initiated land reforms and nationalized several industries to strengthen Bangladesh’s economy, but his efforts did not succeed. Bangladesh was still recovering financially from its war for independence, and its armed forces were split between those who fought in the liberation war and those who were repatriates from Pakistan. The latter, who owed no loyalty to Mujib, were suspicious of his using the army to crush domestic challenges to his authority; the army in turn began their own challenges. A famine followed in 1974, which motivated Mujib to adopt a more authoritarian approach and establish a one-party socialist state. In doing so, he lost many of his middle class and intelligentsia supporters, and in 1975, Mujib and his family was all assassinated in a military coup.\textsuperscript{27}

General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) then rose to become a new military ruler, who created conditions so that he could be elected as president and choose an obedient parliament; in 1981, however, growing military tensions resulted in the assassination of Zia and the installation of General Ershad. Ershad, who ruled until a popular uprising forced his resignation in 1990, promoted privatization of government industries and was widely considered a particularly corrupt ruler. In 1990 Zia’s widow, Begum Khaleda Zia was elected prime minister; she was replaced in 1996 by the election of Mujib’s daughter, Sheikh Hasina Wajid.\textsuperscript{28} Begum Zia returned to power in 2001.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{26} Bose and Jalal, \emph{Modern South Asia}, 218-19.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 236. Bose and Jalal claim that this assassination and coup have been linked to the American CIA. Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal, \emph{Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy}, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 198.
\textsuperscript{28} Bose and Jalal, \emph{Modern South Asia}, 236.
As a young country that was formed only in 1971, there were many attempts to define Bangladeshi culture—both within and outside Bangladesh—involving visual arts and music. Furthermore, Bangladesh’s recent political separation from the Indian and Pakistani states created an impetus to define Bangladeshi culture as something distinguishable from Indian and Pakistani culture. But, given the complex geo-political history of the whole Bengali region, the boundaries between Indian and Bangladeshi culture cannot be easily delineated. The Bengali language has thus emerged as both a significant marker and foundation for establishing a discernible Bangladeshi identity.

The existence of Bangladeshi classical music is rarely acknowledged outside Bangladesh, but it is of crucial importance within the country, particularly in the context of its nationalist history. Prior to the formation of the state of Bangladesh, the performance of Indian classical traditions under British colonialism served to demonstrate India’s status as a civilized culture steeped in traditions that were thousands of years old; those affirmations of India’s civilized culture implicitly questioned Britain’s capacity and need to rule over India at all. As discussed in chapter 1, classical music and high culture traditions were cultivated with special care in the period before and after India’s independence in 1947 because those traditions powerfully legitimized India’s culture and thus its right to autonomous rule. Classical music was an essential component of Indian culture, and as a result, also an essential component of the national project to define Indian culture to the rest of the world.

28 While these women were to a large extent able to establish themselves as a result of the constituencies established by their family members, it was precisely their close relationship to previous administrations that established the public’s trust in their ability to rule.
The same use of art and music to communicate independent cultural legitimacy and political sovereignty occurred in Bangladesh, though these attempts to construct Bangladeshi culture were doubly challenged by two conditions. First, the new government did not have adequate resources to provide and develop anything but the most basic social and economic institutions. Second, and more importantly, there were simply not many skilled musicians in Bangladesh. Calcutta, West Bengal, had always been the cultural capital of greater Bengal prior to 1947. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, was thus ill prepared to assume the role of the cultural capital of (then) East Pakistan; the city lacked the social and institutional support for musical activities “befitting a capital.” 30 Before 1947, most skilled musicians in East Bengal had migrated to India because they were Hindu. A few key musicians and composers remained, however, and these musicians strove to develop a tradition of modern music in Dhaka.

The patriotic and nationalist songs associated with composers like Nazrul Islam assumed a major part of the new music composed in East Bengal. Considered Bangladesh’s national poet, Nazrul set many of his poems to songs, many of which asserted anti-colonial themes, during the 1930s. In conjunction with attempts to promote Bengali language, Nazrul songs and other patriotic Bengali songs were performed during the 1950s and 1960s as an articulation of Bengali identity, and thus a form of resistance to Pakistan. The crucial role of nationalist and patriotic songs in the classical music traditions of Bangladesh is thus linked to the nation’s efforts to establish its political sovereignty. But exactly what is Bangladeshi “classical music,” and how has it contributed to establishing British Bangladeshi culture in East London? I will consider this question in context of the 1999 Bangladesh Festival. First it is

important to discuss the situation of Bengali and Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain.

**History of Bengali and Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain**

The first Bengalis to settle in Britain during the late 18th-century were seamen; known as *lascars*, they were employed by the British navy, and some slipped secretly ashore. However, only after India’s independence and the violence and tumult of Partition in 1947 did Bengalis began to migrate to Britain in large numbers. Most of these immigrants were from the northeastern region of Sylhet (see Figure 3.1 below); their middle-class rural backgrounds enabled them to afford the fare and other expenses to settle in Britain.
Figure 3.1 Modern Bangladesh

At first, they consisted largely of men who left their families behind in East Bengal (then East Pakistan). Most of them had come to England to make money, send it home, and then return home themselves to their families; but as some stayed on, they called for their families to join them in Britain. To this day, the Sylheti community in Britain continues to invest a great deal of their

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income back in Sylhet, to the extent that Sylhet is one of the wealthiest regions in Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{32}

By the mid 1960s, many East Bengalis (soon to be Bangladeshis) had settled around Brick Lane. Many of them hoped to work in the tailoring and dress trade, but most factories had closed. As a result, they worked in sweatshops in the area, often run by Pakistani middlemen. Brick Lane, which was home for the last four hundred years to a series of disadvantaged ethnic groups, including the Irish, French Huguenots, and then Eastern European Jews, by the 1970s, had now become mostly Bangladeshi. The seventies witnessed a large number of violent attacks on these Bangladeshis by skinheads and members of the National Front. During this period, Bangladeshi children were let out of school early so they could arrive home safely, and council housing tenants in Tower Hamlets were provided with fireproof mailboxes.\textsuperscript{33}

Racial discrimination and violence were the greatest challenges to the Bangladeshi immigrant population during the 1970s. The culmination of this violence occurred in September 1978, when a young Bangladeshi factory worker was murdered as he returned home from work. Altab Ali’s death is now commemorated by a park almost directly across from the Whitechapel Gallery that bears his name.

\textsuperscript{32} The Sylheti population speaks a different dialect of Bengali than those in most of Bangladesh; it is often recognized as a separate language in itself. Unlike most of their neighbors in other regions of Bangladesh, the Sylhetis take particular pride in the fact that they cultivated their own land and thus were never subject to ill treatment and exploitation by zamindars, or wealthy landowners. The fact that they owned their own land, which they could mortgage, was a significant factor in their distinct capacity to raise sufficient capital to settle in Britain. The Bangladeshi Community (BBC Gloucestershire, [cited July 4 2005]); available from http://www.bbc.co.uk/gloucestershire/untold_stories/asian/bangladeshi_community.shtml. For more on the Sylhetis in London see, Katy Gardner and Abdus Shukur, "I'm Bengali, I'm Asian, and I'm Living Here": The Changing Identity of British Bengalis," in Desh Pardesh: The South Asian Presence in Britain, ed. Roger Ballard (London: Hurst & Company, 1994).

Illustration 3.1 Altab Ali Park

In May 1978, seven thousand Bangladeshis gathered and marched to Downing Street to protest his death. Several other anti-racist protests followed, which were then countered by the National Front and other reactionary groups’ systematic racial harassment of Bangladeshis around Brick Lane and Spitalfields. These protests resulted in the increasing politicization of the Bengali population, which during this period, formed links with the local Labor Party.

These political links ushered in a new wave of redevelopment in the area, mostly through a local organization, the Spitalfields Community Development Group (CDG). One of the CDG’s efforts focused on the redevelopment of Brick Lane as a “Banglatown” into “a vital and exciting

34 Ibid.
focus of commercial and cultural life... a bazaar area representative of the full range of Bangladeshi, English, Jewish, Somali, and other ethnic ingredients in the area.” These developments were intended to bring tourists to the areas. Housing for Bangladeshi families was also included in these plans; the CDG hoped that the “presence of family and children… [would] enhance the vitality and the authenticity of the area” and prove itself as a “creative reinvention of the past,” a recognition of the new of the values of history, but no slavish imitation of the past.”

As Jane M. Jacobs has noted, this new concept of “Banglatown” was far from a simple ‘return’ or recovery of an ancestral past. Neither was it simply an ‘appropriation’ by external interests of essentialised notions of ‘Bengali’ [Bangladeshi] in the service of economic diversification and expansions. Nor was it a clearly marked ‘parodic subversion’ in which essentialised identity categories were mimicked for the purposes of resistance. It was, rather, an activation of an essentialised identity category by one sector of the Bengali community within the terms of the enterprise-linked development opportunities available. The local businessmen who promoted ‘Banglatown’ traded on an essentialised notion of their culture as a component part of a broader plan to control redevelopment in their favour, acquire land, ensure social amenity and establish opportunities for Bengali youth to enter the workforce.

The CDG drew what Jacobs has called a “patina” of participation from the Bangladeshi population without truly engaging any of them; yet a Bengali Labour Councilor called the CDG plans ‘naïve and opportunistic,” claiming the Bangladeshi businessmen involved with the CDG did not accurately represent the Bangladeshi population as a whole. Jacobs notes that the Left (dominated by members of the Labor Party) charged Bangladeshi businessmen with “trying to turn Spitalfields into ‘another part of Bangladesh,

37 Jacobs, Edge of Empire, 100.
a ‘return’ which was incommensurate with the ‘tradition and history’ of Spitalfields.”39 In other words, the Left charged the Bangladeshis with trying to transform Spitalfields into a place that reflected their own cultural history, as opposed to that of the English populations who had historically settled there. She also notes that the Left stood to benefit in restricting Bangladeshi identity to forms consistent with their own notions of Spitalfields as the emblematic site of an Englishness that accommodated, but then sought to domesticate, [as opposed to assimilating], difference.”40 Jacobs notes that this imagined version of Spitalfields acknowledged its new immigrants, but did so in a way that lay to rest any fears of being overtaken by a postcolonial diaspora. Rather, this imagined version defined Spitalfields as a “multicultural-receptor” that reified various English (colonial) identities and demanded a quite specific, subordinate form of Bangladeshi identity.41 Thus the British Bangladeshi population’s intended role within this “multicultural-receptor” rarely corresponded with their own desires to join and participate in British society; rather they were being called upon to provide some “local color.”

These redevelopment schemes had mixed results in the Brick Lane area. In the early 1990s, two more young Bangladeshi men from the area, Quddus Ali and Muktar Ahmed, were killed. Sukhdev Sandhu has written that it was at this time that Bangladeshis began feel increasingly distant from a “British Asian” identity, which they associated more with the Hindu and Sikh Gujaratis and Punjabis who had more established economic and social networks, and were as a whole wealthier and more educated. As younger generations grew tired of watching their parents being treated badly without

40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
fighting back, many were so frustrated as to join gangs, and others joined Islamic groups. Their anger over Salman Rushdie’s novel The Satanic Verses, and the 1991 Gulf War made them into even more devout Muslims than their parents, and in the current political context, these radicalized Muslims are considered particularly dangerous threats to British society.42

Most British Bangladeshi musicians came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the Bangladeshi population was most politicized against racism. As Sarah Glynn has noted, these political and identity struggles in the British Bangladeshi community in the 1970s and 1980s hold little if any relevance for the younger generation now in Tower Hamlets. Glynn notes that most second-generation British Bangladeshis, that is, those born in Britain, still maintain ties to Bangladesh; they often refer to their parents’ native land as “home.”

Yet the secular politics of the older generation of immigrants—politics that had once helped Bangladesh gain its independence from Pakistan—alienated many of those from the younger generation.43 The idealism surrounding Bangladeshi nationalism and its possibilities has faded. British Bangladeshi musicians from an older generation considered community activism as one of the most productive platforms in which they could affirm their identities. One of the most significant of these activist groups was the League of Joi Bangla. The League of Joi Bangla, a community cultural group, was formed in East London in the early 1980s to foster a positive vision of Bangladeshi identity; the league and its activities generated the Joi Bangla Sound System, whose members later became part of the band Joi, as well as

42 Sandhu, *Come Hungry, Leave Edgy*. These trends of course relate to the more recent bombings in London on July 7, 2005. Within more radical Islamic organizations in London, the cultural distinctions between Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are downplayed; the majority of members in these organizations, however, are of Pakistani as opposed to Bangladeshi descent.
State of Bengal and Asian Dub Foundation. Those older musicians (born in the
mid to early 1970s) still feel a tie to community work built around the arts and
identify strongly with this positive vision of Bangladeshi identity, which is
linked directly to the Bangladeshi struggle for independence, as well as to the
mobilization of the Bangladeshi community against racism during the late
1970s.

Through the League of Joi Bangla, during the mid-1980s, several British
Bangladeshi teenagers and younger people adopted the cry “Joi Bangla”
(Victory to Bengal) associated with the liberation struggle in Bangladesh.44 The
group had 150 members and organized activities for younger people,
including traditional cultural shows and community-based political activism.
Joi member Haroon Shamsher has commented on the group’s intent:

“The original League had a constitution to promote Bengali culture...
[T]o us, Joi Bangla means “oppression,” means “victory,” we thought
“victory to the oppressed.” We wanted to make sure there was no gap
between the parents and the second generation. We had an office in
Luton, and another office in Bangladesh.

At the time, there was a big Bhangra scene going on. We were
categorized into that bunch. The western media didn’t have [a] clue.
Bhangra [associated with Punjabi youth] to them mean Pakistan, Bengali,
you know. Bhangra had a really bad reputation at the time. Kids were
skipping school to go to shows... So we wanted to do something that
was also something our parents liked. So at the shows we would have
like Bangoli [Bangladeshi] magicians so our parents can get along with it,
so you have these traditional Bangoli dances, some Bengali art. We
wanted to get away from that stereotypical Bhangra stuff... and to
promote Bangli music. And we really got a lot of recognition.”45

As Shamsher notes, the group League of Joi Bangla represented a
positive presence in East London. Members of the group were asked to

44 Gardner and Shukur, “’I’m Bengali, I’m Asian, and I’m Living Here’.”, Naeem Mohaiemen,
Joi: Bengali Boys from East London [Joi Talks to Naeem: March 15, 1999] (Shobak, March 15 1999
Bangladeshi Community.
45 Mohaiemen, Joi: Bengali Boys from East London.
perform for morning television news shows, as well as different cultural celebrations, particularly melas (cultural festivals) organized by the South Asian immigrant population. Many of their songs dealt with political issues, as well as affirmations of Bangladeshi/Bengali identity.\textsuperscript{46} One member of the group has explained her activities thus:

I rap in Bengali and English. I rap on everything from love to politics. I’ve always been into rapping... it was rebellious, the lyrics were sensational. I could relate to that, I could identify with it. Like living in the ghetto and all that...It’s coming from the heart. It’s: “I’m Bengali, I’m Asian, I’m a woman, and I’m living here.”\textsuperscript{47}

Sociologists Katy Gordan and Abdus Shukur have described Joi Bangla as a “fashionable, moderately rebellious and highly politicized sub-culture,”\textsuperscript{48} which suggests the group’s elitism. As the rapper above states above, she recognizes what it was to live “in the ghetto.” Gordan and Shukur’s description of the group is somewhat misleading; the group was more focused on involving as many youth as possible in socially constructive activities, and making those activities fun and appealing across generations.

\textbf{British Bangladeshis in London}

Arts Worldwide, which organizes a variety of different events that seek to bring attention to cultures from different parts of the world, focused on Bangladesh for its second cultural festival in July 1999 with the aim of improving the social conditions for the Bangladeshis in East London, specifically within the borough of Tower Hamlets.\textsuperscript{49} Insofar as the British Bangladeshi population comprise a visible and rapidly growing minority, they

\textsuperscript{46} Personal communication with Sam Zaman, London, July 10, 1999
\textsuperscript{47} Gardner and Shukur, ”I’m Bengali, I’m Asian, and I’m Living Here”,” 161.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 161a.
have attracted a considerable amount of attention in recent years. In 1993, it was recognized as the fastest rising youth population in Europe.50 Their rapid growth as a population has also been constituted as a threat; Bangladeshi young men are alternately figured as socially deprived men who are out of control and prone to committing physical violence, joining gangs, and selling drugs or as extremist Muslims, who in their refusal to integrate to British, i.e. English, norms, represent a potential terrorist threat.51

In 2002, British Bangladeshis numbered an estimated 300,000; of those, 86,000 lived in the city of London. Within London, 50,000 British Bangladeshis live in the East London borough of Tower Hamlets, where they comprise 28% of the total population. In 2001, British Bangladeshis comprised 58% of the Spitalfields and Banglatown ward in Tower Hamlets.52

The British Bangladeshi population’s rapid growth attracts particular notice when viewed alongside their publicly recognized status as the most disadvantaged ethnic group in Britain.53 The British Bangladeshi population in

50 The 1991 census revealed at least 37% of the British Bangladeshi population was born within Britain. In 1993, British Bangladeshi children comprised over half of all schoolchildren within the Tower Hamlets borough. Furthermore, over half of the total population in Tower Hamlets in 1993 was under the age of 25. See Isabelle Fremeaux, “Community and Cultural Policy: The Arts Worldwide Bangladesh Festival,” Rising East 3, no. 3 (2000): 56.
51 This idea of Bangladeshi youth as potential terrorists has of course been voiced more often since the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York, and especially after the more recent attacks in London on July 7 and 20, 2005. For more on the essentializing of Bangladeshi male identities, see Claire Alexander, “Beyond Black: Re-Thinking the Colour/Culture Divide,” Ethnic and Racial Studies 25, no. 4 (2002), Claire Alexander, “(Dis)Entangling the ‘Asian Gang’: Ethnicity, Identity, Masculinity,” in Un/Settled Multiculturalisms, ed. Barnor Hesse (London: Zed Books, 2000).
53 In 1986, the British House of Commons Home Affairs Committee initiated a report, Bangladeshis in Britain that labeled British Bangladeshis quite memorably as the “most disadvantaged ethnic group in Britain.” See "Bangladeshis in Britain," (London: House of
Tower Hamlets faces significant social and economic challenges including a rising number of street gangs (of both young men and women) and associated violent incidents, a high rate of drug addiction (especially to heroin,) a scarcity of housing in tolerable conditions that can accommodate frequently large families, and a high rate of unemployment. More than one in five men under 25 in the Spitalfields and Banglatown ward were unemployed in 2002; while the average unemployment rate for men in Tower Hamlets in 2002 was 15%, in Spitalfields and Banglatown, 37% of men between the ages of 37 and 44 were unemployed.\(^{34}\)

As the statistics for Tower Hamlets show, British Bangladeshi young people still do not have opportunities to better themselves. As a result, this younger generation does not connect so much to the older generation of musicians and their community work; some youths have cast away what to them appears to be a politically bankrupt Bangladeshi identity for a more potent one that situates itself in a conservative strain of Islam. The Bangladesh Festival’s celebration of Bangladeshi nationalism tried to address and remedy the fact that British Bangladeshi youth are unable to visit Bangladesh and risk being distanced from their Bangladeshi heritage, but it did so in such a way

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34 Commons Home Affairs Committee (HMSO), 1986. Some of the factors that motivated this label include language difficulties, labor conditions, and racial attacks. In 1986 half of male British Bangladeshis spoke English not at all or slightly; at that time, they also comprised 90% of Tower Hamlets’ homeless. 70% of British Bangladeshi males employed in Tower Hamlets worked as either unskilled or semi-skilled laborers, and those in the catering trade could expect to work only 10 to 15 hours per week; the population as a whole faced significant racial discrimination as well. See Vaughan Robinson, "Boom and Gloom: The Success and Failure of South Asians in Britain," in South Asians Overseas: Migration and Ethnicity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 293. For additional information, refer to S. Carey and A. Shukur, "A Profile of the Bangladeshi Community in East London," New community 12, no. 3 (1985). More information on racial discrimination against the British Bangladeshi population may be found in the following report: "Racial Attacks and Harassment," (London: House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (HMSO), 1986).

Glyn, "Bengali Muslims,” 974. The higher rate for older men most likely relates to their command of English; younger generations born and raised within Britain with a command of English, and perhaps computer proficiency as well, would be presumed to be more employable.
that risked exoticizing Bangladeshi culture and making Bangladeshi identity seem even more ill-suited to a vital, modern lifestyle in London.

The Bangladesh Festival as Community Initiative and Intervention

Founded in 1982, Arts Worldwide organizes a variety of different events that seek to bring attention to cultures from different parts of the world. The Bangladesh Festival held in 1999 was the second of two internationally focused festivals organized by Arts Worldwide; in 1997, Arts Worldwide organized a Yemen Festival. The Bangladesh Festival was held July 7-25, 1999 across different venues in London to celebrate the culture of Bangladesh and the Bangladeshi communities in London. It featured a variety of events and activities including a photography exhibition, musical performances, poetry readings, plays, crafts exhibitions, storytelling, and a food fair. The Bangladesh Festival was organized by an educational charity based in London, Arts Worldwide. As part of its mission, Arts Worldwide attempts to work with respective Britain-based immigrant communities whose cultures are being featured in festivals, and to involve them within the festival as “advisors, artists and audiences.”

Why Bangladesh was chosen as the country whose culture would be featured in 1999 has as much if not more to do with the potentially enormous

55 The Yemeni Festival presented an exhibition on the architecture of various Yemeni cities; it also included performances of Yemeni traditional music, poetry, and dancing by artists based in Yemen and various educational initiatives including a series of documentaries and films on Yemeni themes and a week of family workshops on pottery and other traditional Yemeni crafts. Mary Hunt notes that the local Yemeni community in London was the most prominent and enthusiastic audience for the Festival; in addition, she notes that the first week of the festival was attended by Yemeni business sponsors and featured various seminars at the Department of Trade and Industry dedicated to strengthening trade links between Yemen and the UK. The Yemeni Festival appears to have been similar in scale to the later Bangladesh Festival, but it does not appear to have stressed its ties to the Yemeni community in the UK--outside of providing them the opportunity to attend cultural performances from their home country. Anne Hunt, The Yemen Festival (The British-Yemeni Society, 1997 [cited June 12 2006]); available from http://www.al-bab.com/bys/articles/hunt.htm.

56 Arts Worldwide: About Us.
funding a Bangladesh-centered program could gather as with the richness of Bangladeshi culture. The particular types and sources of funding associated with the Bangladesh Festival are important to recognize as they determined the nature of the events featured in the festivals, particularly those associated with the British Asian popular musicians. Billed as “the largest ever celebration of Bangladeshi arts and culture in Europe,” the Festival was covered extensively in all of London’s major newspapers, as well as some European publications. The festival also motivated discussions surrounding British economic aid and development in Bangladesh, and its immigration policy with respect to Bangladeshi immigrants.

Building this relationship to “the Bangladeshi community” was a key component of the Festival’s original conception. As Isabelle Fremeaux has noted, the project’s proposed focus on involving and empowering the “community” made it particularly attractive to public funding organizations and policy makers.\(^57\) The Festival acquired an extraordinary amount of public funding—roughly £400,000 total.\(^58\) These funds were granted by a variety of public institutions, including the London Arts Board and London Borough Grants, the Arts Council of England, Visiting Arts (British Council), and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.\(^59\) Funds were also granted by the Single Regeneration Budget and European Social Fund, which were intended to “provide business advice, support and capacity building opportunities to Bangladeshi arts organisations in East London.”\(^60\)

The patrons of the Bangladesh Festival propelled the political and economic concerns to the foreground, for their participation in the Festival constituted a highly publicized diplomatic venture with between Bangladesh

\(^{57}\) Fremeaux, “Community and Cultural Policy,” 46.
\(^{58}\) Ibid.
\(^{59}\) Arts Worldwide: About Us.
\(^{60}\) Fremeaux, “Community and Cultural Policy,” 46.
and Britain. The festival patrons, as identified on publicity materials, notably included Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of Bangladesh, and Prime Minister Tony Blair; both Blair and Hasina actually addressed audiences in person at the festival’s opening ceremony in London. Hasina’s visit to Britain was the first official visit made to Britain by a Bangladeshi prime minister since the 1970s, and she spent a number of days in meetings with various individuals and organizations trying to attract more British investment and aid. Blair remarked that the event “would highlight the enormous contribution made by the Bangladeshi community to Britain.”

The other sponsors associated with the Festival had a significant role as well, but in monetary terms. The extensive register of other additional sponsors listed on the publicity brochure from private and public sources provided a £1,000,000 budget for the Festival, which was planned for over a period of three years. These private sponsors included Beximco—the biggest contributor--described as “the largest business group in Bangladesh involved in textiles, chemicals, ceramics, construction, real estate, jute, marine foods and media,” as well as its “silver sponsors,” Shell, the British firm Cairn Energy, and Duncan Brothers, a Bangladesh-based tea producer.

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63 “The Arts Worldwide Bangladesh Festival [Publicity Pamphlet],” (London: Arts Worldwide, 1999). The decision to accept Beximco as a principal sponsor was viewed as unethical by many Bangladeshis in London because the High Court of Bangladesh had very recently condemned its production of chemicals. See Fremeaux, “Community and Cultural Policy,” 61. In more recent years, Beximco Textiles has received international attention from human rights and labor watchdog groups for exploiting its workers and its position as a major supplier to Wal-Mart. See Dolores Calderon Lopez, “The Means of Production: A Study of the Effects of International Trade by United States Multinational Corporations on the Labor Force of Less-Developed and Developing Countries,” International Law Quarterly XVIII, no. 2 (2002-03). Cairn and Shell’s shared focus on energy relates to the fact that Bangladesh’s natural resources include abundant sources of natural gas, as well as small quantities of oil and coal; these resources in Bangladesh have attracted the attention of multinational energy-related companies.
by the Festival’s educational aims, which provided a highly visible opportunity for private companies to demonstrate their commitment to social and cultural development through their association with the Festival.

Illustration 3.2 Bangladesh Festival banner on Brick Lane, July 1999

Given the socio-economic challenges faced by many British Bangladeshis, the Bangladesh Festival organizers were determined to integrate British Bangladeshi youths’ involvement in the project. The Bangladesh Festival’s three aims for the “community” included “capacity building,” empowerment, and raising awareness of the community’s profile.64 The empowerment project took the form of involving local youth and other community members in the Festival, and through that participation, strengthening both their self-confidence as individuals, and as a community.

64 Fremeaux, “Community and Cultural Policy,” 56.
The Bangladesh Festival did in many ways attempt to integrate the participation of the community, as has been mentioned; all these proposed forms of participation were publicized in such a way as to encourage residents of other parts of London and tourists to recognize the existence of Bangladeshi culture in the East End. For example, because the Festival events took place in the East End, visitors from other parts of London were required to go into the very heart of the Bangladeshi community. The festival organizers had calculated that some Londoners would want to venture to this neighborhood to encounter a more authentic experience of Asian culture, or at the very least, sample curry at one of the many restaurants there. “Capacity building” refers to developing a respective group’s future ability to organize, develop, and complete projects, without outside help. As part of these efforts, Arts Worldwide at the time of the Festival reported that it was arranging vocational training for four Bangladeshis from Tower Hamlets, a borough in East London dominated by Bangladeshi immigrants, as “Modern Apprentices.”

The Bangladesh Festival sought, in particular, to present an exuberant and vital portrayal of Bangladeshi culture, whose existence is only seldom acknowledged outside Bangladesh. As a young British Bangladeshi staff member at the Festival pointed out, “The first thing that comes to most people’s minds when you mention Bangladesh is floods…”65 Amidst our inundation of news reports of natural disasters, political unrest, and profound poverty often associated with the country, the fact that the people of Bangladesh have distinct musical and artistic traditions is often forgotten. Acknowledging and highlighting the existence of these traditions was a

crucial step in both affirming young Bangladeshis’ identification with a rich cultural heritage and educating the general public and increasing their respect for the uniqueness of Bangladeshi cultural traditions.

Defining Bangladeshi music

While North Indian classical music traditions do dominate classical instrumental performance traditions in Bangladesh, Bangladesh can claim its own distinct classical vocal traditions in Nazrul songs, a genre of songs composed by and set to the revolutionary and nationalist poetry of poet Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), and Tagore songs, songs composed by and set to poems by the Bengali poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore.66 Although these genres, based as they are in the Bengali language, have limited appeal outside Bangladesh, West Bengal, and Bengali diasporic communities.

Bengali music and more specifically, Bangladesh’s music, has not been widely studied or written about by scholars in Western Europe or the United States, most of whom focus on the classical traditions of North India and South India exclusively, at the expense of more regionally based traditions and folk genres.67 The mystical Baul sect and their songs constitute a glaring

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66 While songs set to the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore’s poetry (Rabindrasangeet) – including the national anthem of Bangladesh, “Amar Šhonar Bangla” (My Golden Bengal)-- are also frequently sung in Bangladesh and considered examples of classical music in Bangladesh, Tagore (1861-1941) and his songs are more associated with the culture of West Bengal in India.

exception to this rule; the Bauls have been the subject of several studies, but
given that these studies have been written by religion and folklore scholars,
Baul music has not received recent musicological attention outside South Asia,
barring a 1986 book on the subject by the American ethnomusicologist Charles
Capwell. As

This frequent overlooking of Bengali music results from the fact that it
has always stood in the shadow of Indian classical traditions, especially for the
west, but perhaps also within the Indian recording industry as well. The
Indian recording industry is dominated by popular Bombay film music, but
some regional genres survive alongside film music. Rabindrasangeet, or Tagore
songs, retain a dedicated but dwindling audience that may be likened to
classical music recording audiences in the United States. As Peter Manuel has
noted, while Calcutta remains a center for the production of the popular
genre, Adhunik gan, or “modern Bengali songs,” have long been in a state of
decline. As a genre of romantic love songs that originated in the 1930s and
were popular through the 1970s, these songs combine earlier genres of musical


Capwell, The Music of the Bauls of Bengal.

theatre with urban folk influences. *Adhunik gan* fails to attract younger audiences, however, who name Bengali rock bands such as Fossil as their favorite Bengali musicians. Given the limited market for *Adhunik gan*, Indian music stores in West Bengal are unlikely to carry Bangladesh-based artists in addition to their own offerings in Bengali music.

The majority of popular music produced in Bangladesh, unlike that in Pakistan and in India, is not based on film music, though Indian and Pakistani film music is quite popular among audiences. There are many Bangladeshi popular musicians, and many younger people consider the most exciting of these to be the numerous rock and metal bands in its urban centers.\(^{70}\) One musician in an underground band has noted that Bangladesh’s highly concentrated population in the capital city of Dhaka and the southern port city of Chittagong affect the production of music in such a way that “if you have one death metal band in Dhaka, there will be five death metal bands in Dhaka a year from now simply from osmosis.”\(^ {71}\)

Dhaka particularly enjoys a thriving local rock music scene, with countless rock bands; while their music is popular among fans of Calcutta-based rock bands, they rarely receive significant attention from Indian audiences outside West Bengal, and their music is often distributed through more informal networks such as the exchange of digital files on the Internet. As a result, they have attracted relatively little commercial interest from major record labels, though this is gradually changing. Rock music in India and Pakistan is also thriving, but because local rock music is overshadowed by the massive scale of production within the film music industry in those countries, relatively few of these bands have become household names. As one musician

\(^{70}\) These rock and metal bands are hardly confined to Bangladesh; they are also very popular in Nepal and the northeastern states of India.  
noted, “Why the fuck would Channel V [an Indian music video channel] show a rock band which nobody cares about when they can just as easily show a garam masala lust-laden video?” Bangladeshi rock bands are not likely to be considered on an Indian music video channel, even if they have the resources to produce a video, which most do not.

Film music’s dominance over local Bangladeshi rock music is rooted in the earliest days of Bangladesh’s recording industry. The most established music companies of Bangladesh first began as pirates of Hindi film music; only after they were able to amass sufficient “black money” (a term used in South Asia to describe the large sums of money exchanged outside legitimate, taxable economic circuits “under the table” in the “shadow” or underground economy) did they begin to produce Bangladeshi artists. Like many other Asian music markets, the music industry’s success is countered by widespread piracy; in Bangladesh, the widespread availability of pirated Hindi film music infringes on potential sales of Bangladeshi music, and in some views, the survival of Bangladeshi culture. A recent editorial lamented this fact:

What has resulted over the years is a huge and thriving market of pirated Hindi music. No less, although significantly smaller, are the works of Bangladesh artistes in Bangali that one can say is the “only competition” and the first line of defence of our culture to the Hindi music onslaught. However, it is the sheer numbers at which Bangladesh original works are sold -- and the huge archival value of the works -- that must be re-emphasised here. Bangladeshi artistes have

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72 Ibid. “Garam masala” alludes to the booming market for Indian “masala movies,” mass produced (often B-list) movies, in which attractive young women dance in choreographed music-dance sequences. These sequences are often excerpted from their original films and presented independently on music video channels across South Asia; those that feature provocative choreography and costumes often draw particularly large audiences.

73 Hindi film music’s perceived threat on the survival of local traditions is of course in no way unique to Bangladesh. Alison Arnold echoes the sentiments of countless other scholars and critics when she notes, “More and more, the once-traditional music performance at Indian religious festivals, social gatherings and family celebrations is disappearing and amplified film music is taking its place.” Alison E. Arnold, “Popular Film Song in India: A Case of Mass Market Musical Eclecticism,” Popular Music 7, no. 2 (1988): 187.
typically been ignored in West Bengal, for instance, and no major Indian companies are willing to market them, despite our music’s entrenched superiority in attracting the youth market there.\footnote{Maqsoodul Haque, \textit{Bangladesh Music Industry Future: A Damning Indictment} (Holiday Internet Edition) ([n.d.] [cited July 17 2005]); available from http://www.weeklyholiday.net/030502/cult.html.}

Given that Indian popular and classical musical traditions have so overwhelmingly overshadowed Bangladeshi music outside Bangladesh, the relative invisibility of Bangladeshi music abroad has led to erroneous assumptions that Bangladesh lacks any noteworthy musical traditions, and in turn, a legitimate culture as a whole. This uninformed view of Bangladeshi music potentially affects British people’s views of British Bangladeshi immigrant culture in East London, insofar that many British people conflate British Bangladeshi culture with Bangladeshi culture itself. The opinion that Bangladesh--and by extension, its immigrant populations--lacks any legitimate culture thus can also be understood to affect how those populations are recognized, respected, and supported within Britain.

In this respect, the obscurity of “classical” Bangladeshi musical traditions, especially to Londoners, posed a challenge to the organizers of the Bangladesh Festival, and this challenge affected their choice of musical genres to present to the public. Bangladeshi rock music and Baul music, although popular within Bangladesh, were not the most effective genres to present to an uninformed audience. Bangladeshi rock music risked being reduced to an inferior derivative of more familiar strains of popular music, and Baul music’s frequent references to esoteric spiritual practices risked both alienating outsiders and presenting an overly exoticized vision of Bangladeshi culture. The determinedly highbrow genres associated with Bangladeshi’s “classical” music, in contrast, had in the past proven to serve as the most effective exemplars abroad of Bangladeshi’s unique cultural traditions in its early
nationalist period. It was to be expected these same genres were ultimately selected to bear much of the burden, along with visual arts, of portraying British Bangladeshi identity.

**Classical and Folk Music Performances at the Bangladesh Festival**

Performances and appearances by British Asian popular musicians comprised only part of the many musical events associated with the Festival; a significant percentage of events featured in the Bangladesh Festival focused on folk music as well as classical and religious music genres. These were usually performed with the aid of guest artists who had traveled from Bangladesh. The concerts served as a public presentation of ethnically authentic Bangladeshi arts, and as such they were a crucial component of Festival’s agenda.

The variety of classical and folk traditions within Bangladesh was made evident through the broad range of performances featured during the Festival; that variety also testified to the organizers’ efforts to involve diverse cultural communities within Bangladesh itself. A brief summary of classical and folk music events featured in the Festival follows: 1. *Dhabi’s Story: A Tale from the Time of Truth*, a musical based on a traditional Bengali story and folk music and performed by local schoolchildren; 2. “The Heart of Bangladesh,” featuring over thirty visiting folk musicians from Bangladesh including the Bauls of Bangladesh (devotional singers and mystics found in Bangladesh and in West Bengal); 3. The Chittagong Drummers from southern Bangladesh, 4. The Manipuri Dancers (practitioners of a form of classical dance performed in northeastern India and Bangladesh,) and 5. The Murong dancers and
musicians (an indigenous group from the forest, distinguished by its use of bamboo pipes).\textsuperscript{75}

The Bangladesh Festival’s classical musical performances included an evening of poetry, readings, and performances presented in tribute to the Indian (Bengali) Nobel Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore, as well as a concert of Nazrul songs. The concert, entitled “The Rebel Poet,” was devoted to the performance of Nazrul songs, and it featured the leading performer of Nazrul songs in Bangladesh, Nilufer Yasmin.\textsuperscript{76} Nazrul songs (\textit{Nazrulgeeti, Nazrulsangeet}) are the only form of classical music whose performance tradition is associated with Bangladesh more strongly than it is with India; Nazrul, widely considered Bangladesh’s national poet, is celebrated for his lyrics against colonial oppression—particularly those that called for revolution against the British during the 1930s.\textsuperscript{77}

Those who perform Nazrul songs in public usually undergo a significant amount of classical vocal training; audience members thus expect singers to project and maintain control over their voices, sing with clear diction and resonance, convey the emotional content of the lyrics, and conform to a recognized range of acceptable vocal timbres already defined by the most prominent singers in the genre. Singers traditionally accompany themselves in unison at the harmonium, though sometimes they may only sing with the drone of a \textit{tanpura}; they are occasionally joined by a tabla player, and more contemporary arrangements may also feature vocal choruses, a small orchestras, and/or synthesizers. Nazrul songs’ prominent presence at the Bangladesh Festival thus served a crucial role in publicly establishing the

\textsuperscript{75} “The Arts Worldwide Bangladesh Festival [Publicity Pamphlet],” 6.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{77} In the early 1940s, Nazrul contracted a brain disease that took away his ability to speak and hear and left him in a near-vegetative state for the remainder of his life.
legitimacy of Bangladeshi’s status as a culture that has its own classical and high culture traditions, and the legitimacy of the Bangladeshi nation itself.

**Baul Performances at the Bangladesh Festival: Traversing the Folk and Classical**

Another concert of vocal music, “Mystical Voices,” blurred the boundaries between Bangladeshi folk and classical music. The publicity brochure associated with the program suggests a tension between the program’s exoticizing title and its subsequent claim that Baul song performances are considered so routine an event that they are “as popular in folks shows at village fairs as in the sophisticated halls of Dhaka.” The contemporary performance of Baul songs, at least according to the brochure, thus transcends the boundaries that usually separate the rural village fair associated with folk traditions, and the urban centers and concert hall most associated with classical traditions.

This concert featured songs based on the 19th century mystical poetry of Lalon (also known as Lalon Shah or Lalon Fakir) and the zamindar (landlord) Hasan Raja, “who renounced a life of tyrannical womanizing to become a devout philosopher and a writer of simple and moving [Sufi] devotional songs.” The songs were performed by two guest artists who were advertised as having “a huge following” and “who very rarely perform in London.” Bidit Lal Das, a leading exponent of Bengali folk song in Bangladesh from Sylhet (in northern Bangladesh), performed Hasan Raja’s songs, and Farida Parveen, the most well known performer of Lalon songs in Bangladesh,
performed Lalon’s songs; both reside in Bangladesh and are classically trained.78

Baul songs are typically performed by the Bauls themselves, members of a religious sect found in both West Bengal in India and in Bangladesh. For most of the 19th century, the Bauls’ rejection of the caste system and practice of esoteric sexual and scatological Tantric rituals designated them as social outcasts and morally repugnant in middle class and upper class Bengali urban culture. In 1883, however, a young Rabindranath Tagore published a review of collected Baul poems in which he charged other Bengali writers to emulate the Baul texts’ direct and natural style in the lyrics to the Baul songs.79 These songs often contemplate the relationship between the individual and God and often make allegorical references to natural phenomena. Tagore integrated references to Baul philosophy and texts throughout his life, though he also distorted and simplified some of their beliefs; as Charles Capwell notes, Tagore introduced the urban classes to Bauls, who were already familiar to rural lower classes. He promoted the Bauls because of his admiration for his own belief that “the Bauls’ worth lay in their sense of inner strength derived from the discovery of a spiritual guide within themselves.”80 Tagore’s regard for the Bauls elevated their status within middle class and upper class Bengali culture, but as Capwell observes, in a very limited context:

However much respectable Bengalis may long for the freedom from conventions that they romantically associate with the Bauls, they are generally, and understandably, content with retaining their respectability while allowing the Bauls to express those longings for them. The imagery

78 "The Arts Worldwide Bangladesh Festival [Publicity Pamphlet],” 9. The brochure mistakenly describes Lalon Shah as a “17th century mystic;” in reality, most of his songs date from the 19th century.
79 Capwell, The Music of the Bauls of Bengal, 22.
80 Ibid., 25.
and the tunes with which the Bauls do this so successfully have acquired for them the status of representing something quintessentially Bengali.\textsuperscript{81}

As Capwell notes, Bengalis could identify with an idealized version of the Bauls’ culture, as put forth and sanitized by Tagore—but not the actual practices and beliefs of the Baul sect. But even that limited and mediated form of identification opened the way for contemporary Bengali people to incorporate certain aspects of Baul culture and beliefs within an understanding of their specific identity as Bengali people. As a result, the singing of Baul songs and their poetic texts, even outside their original context, became a powerful component of being Bengali.

While Baul songs are claimed as part of both West Bengal and Bangladesh’s cultural heritage, Lalon is particularly significant in Bangladesh. Lalon’s songs are often considered a subset of Baul songs; his songs form an important genre of their own, called \textit{Lalongeeti}. Lalon (1774-1890) was born in Kushtia (in present-day India,) and over the course of his 116-year life, Lalon established himself as one of the most famous Baul singers and poets. Rabindranath Tagore was his most passionate advocate; after Lalon allegedly accepted an invitation to visit Tagore’s ancestral house in Kushtia, Lalon’s music and poetry influenced Tagore to the extent that it inspired Tagore himself to write a number of songs in the Baul style.\textsuperscript{82} Although Lalon’s songs were never written down, they have been passed down through his descendents, known as Shains, since his death.

The performer of the Lalon songs in the festival, Farida Parveen, was trained as a classical singer, that is, in the traditions of Hindustani vocal music, Tagore songs, and Nazrul songs. She gained a reputation initially with

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 20.
Nazrul songs, and was reportedly somewhat hesitant to begin singing Lalon songs because she was a woman, and because she came from a middle class background with little knowledge of the Bauls and their philosophy. (While some classically oriented singers who are not Bauls themselves have adopted Baul songs as part of their repertoire, these singers are almost exclusively men.) After the independence of Bangladesh, Farida Parveen came to specialize in Lalon songs primarily and is now most credited with bringing his songs to the urban middle class, as did Rabindranath Tagore a century before her.

In a recent interview with *The Daily Star*, Bangladesh’s largest English-language daily newspaper, Parveen demonstrated that she has no problems with singing songs from a subculture that she herself does not belong to because of the songs’ broader cultural and musical appeal:

Yes they are based on a certain discourse, yet there are these principles of rhythm and melody, which has the same quality to move everyone. The resonance that a song like ‘Milon hobey koto diney’ (how long it is till our union) has left a mark in the hearts of people... Most people fascinated by Lalon believe in the guru of knowledge, I accepted the guru only in respect of singing.

Parveen notes that she does not consider Lalon as a spiritual advisor but does consider him as the guide to her singing. She thus manages to separate herself from the specifics of Baul beliefs and practices, while at the same time she appropriates their musical and lyrical content to abstract, universal principles such as the longing to unite with one’s God. Some purists object to her rendition of Lalon songs, but Parveen is confident in her abilities and her

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84 Ibid.
authority because of the pedigree of her teachers, the Shains, who are practicing Bauls recognized as "the disciples of Lalón" and "torchbearers of both his philosophy and practice."\(^{85}\) She does acknowledge the fact that her classical training transforms this music that is traditionally associated with and sung by social outcasts:

There is a difference between the rendition of a B song by an original Baul and by one with a sophisticated voice... But, isn't it obvious that any singer has something personal to offer?\(^{86}\)

Parveen’s musical training transforms these somewhat rustic songs that are traditionally sung in a ritual context among spiritual initiates into a more "cultivated," artistic product sanctioned and consumed by middle-class and upper-class audiences. While she may lack the authority to preside over Baul rituals and traditions, she values her own ability to convey what she believes to be the beauty of the Bauls’ text to a wider audience who can then appreciate them; her own middle class standing enables her to both consort with the Shains as her teachers and convey these songs to people who would traditionally shun social relations with the Bauls. In this way, she replicates the initial attempt by Rabindranath Tagore to bring the music of the Baul outcasts to respectable middle and upper-class audiences and removes their social stigma. In this manner, she strengthens her own prerogative to infuse those songs with her personal interpretation.

Sadya Afreen Mallick, the music critic for *The Daily Star* and a recognized singer of Nazrul songs in her own right, has confirmed Parveen’s commitment to Lalón, and to Bangladeshi culture:

[To sing] Lalón’s compositions requires deep respect for our culture and also our country. Farida [Parveen] portrays an incredible sense of

\(^{85}\) Ibid.  
\(^{86}\) Ibid.
patriotism in her words, and the love, dedication and respect for her country, music, and Lalon are always seen hovering in her eyes strengthening everyone around her.\textsuperscript{87}

In this passage, Mallick explicitly connects the performance of Lalon’s songs specifically to an expression of Bangladeshi patriotism more generally. The middle and upper class acknowledgement that Lalon songs form an important part of Bangladeshi national culture is significant; it necessarily requires that the traditions be “sanitized” through disavowing the rituals of the Bauls, and reinterpreting these songs through the cultivated, socially sanctioned voice of a classically trained singer. The nationalism associated with the Bauls is conveniently excised from its mores and romanticized into a narrative that values individual expression and freedom; in erasing the unpleasantries (and indeed real context) associated with the tradition from which it originates, the cultivation of Lalon songs distorts their source as it incorporates it within a national ideal. The performance of Lalon, Tagore, and Nazrul songs, in particular, were in the late 1960s a significant expression of Bangladeshi nationalism and resistance against the Pakistani government. At a gathering with her former classmates at Chhayanaaut Bhavan (a music conservatory in Dhaka), Mallick and her classmates reminisced about the musical performances they organized to celebrate \textit{Pahela Baishakh}, or the first day of the Bengali New Year. Her classmate Iffat Ara recalled,

Elaborate programmes were chalked out to keep the audience glued to their seats for an hour or two. The festival was initially seen with a vindictive attitude by the then authority of Pakistan who made repeated attempts to divert the attention of the Bangalis.\textsuperscript{88}


\textsuperscript{88} Ibid. The spelling “Bangali” is correct; although the Indian Bengali population uses the term “Bangali” / “Bangoli” to sometimes denigrate people from Bangladesh and imply their inferiority, the term is embraced by Bangladeshis in Bangladesh.
For Ara, the mere act of gathering to listen to a performance of Bengali music constituted a form of resistance to Pakistani oppression, and their resistance was recognized to the extent that attempts were made to interrupt the program. Another classmate, Selina Malek, elaborated on the significance during this time of these festivals and the repertoire typically associated with them:

From [1967 onwards] seasonal programmes...[,] the birth and death anniversary of Rabindra Nath Tagore and Nazrul Islam, fund raisers for the flood victims and many other related programmes played a major role in inspiring the Bangalis to identify with their roots. The spontaneous and massive participation of the people multiplied every year and indicated the unity with the social movement.\textsuperscript{89}

Karunamaya Goswami has also remarked on these songs’ crucial role in the nationalist movement in East Bengal. During the nine-month long liberation war in 1971, Independent Bangladesh Radio broadcast a particular group of songs—now known as Liberation War songs—that included older nationalist compositions by Tagore as well as new compositions such as Anwar Pervez and Gazi Maharul Anwar’s ““Joi Bangla” (“Victory to Bangladesh”).\textsuperscript{90}

Thus the performance of these classical and folk songs in the context of the Bangladesh Festival established, for cultural outsiders, Bangladesh’s claim to a rich cultural heritage, but in a highly artificial manner that more often than not romanticized the sources of this heritage to establish this traditions’ legitimacy. The cultural traditions represented in the Festival also conveyed a particular expression of Bangladeshi culture, namely one rooted in middle and upper class social decorum. While the significance of political songs such as Nazrul songs was acknowledged as an important part of the national narrative of Bangladesh, the artificiality of staging these songs within the

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Goswami, “Music Regions: West Bengal and Bangladesh,” 858-59.
context of a formal concert obscured their history as instrumental in the formation of a nationalist sentiment. The Bangladesh Festival aimed to reinforce the initial optimism associated with a relatively recent nationalist struggle for the Bangladeshi population, and to let them share and affirm those patriotic feelings in a foreign space. In actuality, it reached an older generation of adults who as cultural outsiders were either listening out of curiosity, or as cultural insiders, were reliving their nostalgia. Younger generations (at least those who were not accompanying their families) were conspicuously absent as this was not the music that held any meaning for them.

**Banglatown Sounds**

The contrast between more traditional genres from Bangladesh and the more contemporary sounds of the East London British Bangladeshi population was as much a function of differences in generations as in geography. Given that the musical program of the Bangladeshi relied mostly on folk and classical musicians from Bangladesh, younger British Asian popular musicians participated only to a limited degree. These popular musicians, however, served a crucial role in the community empowerment project, particularly in the DJ and song competition called “Banglatown Sounds,” which was promoted as a highlight of the Bangladesh Festival’s opening celebrations. In this competition, described as “the chance to find out why the East End is currently the most popular place to be in London,” local youth were asked to submit recordings of music that they had created; the judges of the competition included prominent, commercially successful British

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Asian musicians and DJs, who were described as “key music industry figures.” These figures included Deedar Zaman and Dr. Das, the MC and bassist for the band Asian Dub Foundation; Mo Magic, a DJ and music producer associated with the British Asian club and record label, Outcaste; Ansar Ullah Ahmed, an original member of the British East London-based Joi Bangla band in the 1980s; Sam Zaman, a producer and DJ known as State of Bengal, also associated with Joi Bangla; and DJ Ritu, the host of a weekly bhangra show on BBC Radio 1 and one of the first British Asian DJs in London.92

The Arts Worldwide Bangladesh Festival then hosted a club night, the Festival Club, that same evening at a popular club, 333, in Shoreditch, East London. This club night brought together performances by the competitions’ winners and other established British Asian popular musicians. Banglatown Sounds Competition’s winners appeared as supporting acts to musicians who originally included Joi as a headline act, and Outcaste DJs Badmarsh, Ges-E, and Mo Magic deejayed in another room.93 One winner was given the chance to perform as an opening act for Asian Dub Foundation, one of the most visible and popular British Asian popular music groups at the time.94

The involvement of these recognized figures helped make the project an attractive and potentially lucrative opportunity for East London youth to develop their music production skills and perhaps even “break into the industry.” The intention of the organizers of the festival was to use this event as a way through which they could include and involve younger people from

92 Deedar Zaman is of Bangladeshi heritage, and the younger brother of Sam Zaman Dr. Das (Aniruddha Das) is of West Bengali (Indian) heritage; Ansar Ullah Ahmed and State of Bengal (Sam Zaman) are of Bangladeshi heritage; DJ Ritu is of Punjabi heritage.
93 “The Arts Worldwide Bangladesh Festival [Publicity Pamphlet].” 9. Haroon Shamsher’s unexpected death on July 8, 1999 – three days before the Banglatown Sounds and Festival Club night was scheduled – affected the musicians who actually appeared that evening; Shamsher comprised one-half of the group Joi, scheduled to perform that evening.
94 Dhingra, “The Bangladesh Beat.”
a range of socioeconomic backgrounds through the performance and production of popular music. Kazi Ruksana Begum, the assistant community program director for the Bangladesh Festival, explained to a reporter from The Guardian that her group of festival organizers had helped those youth who submitted demo tapes by working with them in a real studio; Begum sought to emphasize that the competition was open to all, regardless of their musical experience “because music has no barriers and we wanted to follow the same philosophy.” Begum’s statement is patently naïve in light of the complex realities that British Asian musicians face in the British recording industry described in Chapter 2, but most likely sincere. The contest appears to have been modeled on a similar local contest a few years earlier that launched the careers of British Asian musicians Osmani Soundz and Badmarsh; Osmani Soundz and Badmarsh had appeared on the Anokha and Outcaste compilations, respectively. To those with no knowledge of this earlier competition, however, Begum’s statement may have implied that these musicians from more disadvantaged backgrounds lacked talent and therefore needed special help to meet acceptable standards, which—as suggested by the historical emergence of British Asian musicians such as Joi and others—would misrepresent the actual situation.

The Banglatown Sounds competition presents one of the most obvious attempts to situate local British Bangladeshi youth within the more socially desirable realm of British Asian identity, specifically the glamorous identity of the British Asian electronica musician. In uniting the youth with established industrial figures, the competition seemed to suggest that these youth’s ethnic cultural heritage and identification with urban street culture were a corollary

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95 Ibid.
96 Osmani Soundz’s contribution to the Anokha compilation, “Spiritual Masterkey,” was judged the winning entry to this contest a few years earlier. Personal communication, Sam Zaman, July 1999.
of their inherent British Asianness; in doing so, the competition underplayed the particularities of the youth’s Bangladeshi heritage and its associated challenges. The tensions between the youth’s Bangladeshi heritage and British Asian identity in this competition may be understood in terms of James Clifford’s concept of “discrepant cosmopolitanisms.” Clifford argues that what appear to be celebratory displays of cultural hybridity—such as these youths’ inclination toward electronic music—may in fact arise from disadvantaged communities’ more sobering attempts to survive and function in a hostile space.97

Asian Dub Foundation and the Chittagong Drummers at the Barbican

The collaboration between the popular band Asian Dub Foundation and the Chittagong Drummers at the Barbican was one of the highpoints of the Bangladesh Festival. As a significant meeting point between a London-based electronica/rock band and musicians who had never left their fishing village in Bangladesh—two sets of musicians who would ordinarily never collaborate—it provided another important venue within which the Bangladesh Festival and British Asian popular musicians interacted. The Chittagong Drummers are from the Southern Bangladesh region of Chittagong; they included five drummers and a cymbal player, all of whom were “fishermen by day,” and musicians who performed “complex and dramatic music from their 3 ft-long shoulder drums at night.”98

98 “City of London Festival (22 June - 15 July 1999) [Brochure],” (London: Corporation of London, 1999), 17. While the Chittagong Drummers performance with Asian Dub Foundation was a centerpiece of the Bangladesh Festival, a free performance (at Cutlers Gardens on July 14, 1999) was cross-listed within the lunchtime international performers series, “Out of World,” part of the City of London Festival.
Their collaboration presented a symbolic union of diasporic and “native” Bengali musicians. Their concert was highly publicized and reviewed by many different newspaper critics, most of whom were more prepared to discuss the British dub- and jungle-influenced music of the Asian Dub Foundation than the Drummers. The concert was divided into three major sections: a performance by the Chittagong Drummers, then a performance of the Asian Dub Foundation with the Chittagong Drummers, and finally a performance by Asian Dub Foundation on their own, joined by the drummers during the final song.

The concert’s setting at the Barbican Centre was significant, insofar as the Barbican Concert Hall is one of London’s most recognized and largest venues. Fully funded by the Corporation of London, the Barbican Concert Hall seats over 2,000 people and serves as the regular home of the London Symphony Orchestra; it is also frequently visited by other ensembles including Berlin Philharmonic and Vienna Philharmonic Orchestras. While the Barbican does present some jazz and world music concerts, its booking schedule is dominated by classical music engagements.99

While most audience members were familiar with the band Asian Dub Foundation, they were for the most part unfamiliar with the Bauls and the Chittagong Drummers, whom they would have likely associated with the commercial category of “world music” (discussed in chapter 2). When the concert was publicized in mainstream publications, it was strategically billed as an Asian Dub Foundation concert. The publicity brochure, however, added a unique angle to the standard praise appearing elsewhere, which notes ADF’s energetic performances and political activism; the Bangladesh Festival framed

Asian Dub Foundation as “self-proclaimed” “21st century electronic troubadours,” and moreover, as a band that specifically engaged with (South Asian) traditional music:

ADF have long been on the record as gleaning traditional folk sounds from their parents’ record collections, mutating them technologically for their own musical performances. Now they get to mix live on stage with Bauls and drummers from Bangladesh.  

The concert listing in the brochure introduced Asian Dub Foundation in such a way as to reinforce the band’s connections to folk music, to the Bauls and Chittagong Drummers, and thus to a “more authentic” set of Bengali musicians; Asian Dub Foundation’s already existing allusions to Bengali folk music (in the form of looped samples) were made more explicit, and the Chittagong Drummers’ unexpected resonances with contemporary popular culture made them look less like anthropological specimens. However, it also took care to establish Asian Dub Foundation’s then trendy status as it proclaimed, “ADF are one of the reasons that all things Asian are deemed definitively ‘cool’.” In proclaiming their trendy status, the listing forged a more concrete connection between the self-consciously politicized, socially conscious Asian Dub Foundation and the highly trended “British Asian scene,” associated with the more fashionable British Asian-oriented clubs such as Anokha, Outcaste, and Swaraj. The concert was well attended due to Asian Dub Foundation’s popularity at the time, and the fact that the collaboration with the Bauls and the Chittagong Drummers also marked Asian Dub Foundation’s first concert in London that year.

The concert’s hybrid character as a collaboration between a British popular music band and indigenous folk musicians from Bangladesh—in a

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100 “The Arts Worldwide Bangladesh Festival [Publicity Pamphlet],” 8.  
101 Ibid.  
102 Ibid.
concert hall no less—created some confusion as to what type of performance it was and therefore how one should behave at the concert. Most critics’ readiness to review the concert as a popular music concert is exemplified in the informal slang penned by Eddie Thomas, a music critic for the established weekly popular music journal, *Melody Maker*: “It’s trad meeting tech in the most glorious way.” The review’s title in fact referred to it as an ordinary Asian Dub Foundation concert; in this respect, the trendiness and glamour of Asian Dub Foundation’s performance as a popular British Asian band obscured the participation of the more traditional drummers who were intended to receive double billing.

As Caroline Sullivan of *The Guardian* noted, the presence of Asian Dub Foundation attracted “a ravey crowd set on turning the place into a club.” Sullivan remarks at how the crowd sat still through the Chittagong Drummers, whose “mad swaying was as mesmerising as their drumming.” Asian Dub Foundation then returned to play on its own for the second set, “instantly bringing the crowd to their feet,” as “[the] guitarists flung themselves across the stage, the DJs alternated between jungle breakbeats and classical Indian scales.”

These two authors’ comments suggest that they interpret the Asian Dub Foundation’s performance in somewhat different ways; Thomas seems to view the group as technology wizards who update the indigenous folk musicians, while Sullivan sees them as bringing together aspects of rock, jungle, and Indian classical music—the last of which embodies tradition.

105 Sullivan, “Bangla Beat Sizzles.”
106 Ibid.
Thus, when Eddie Thomas sets up an opposition between “trad” (traditional or roots music) and “tech,” he refers to the Chittagong Drummers and Asian Dub Foundation respectively. While the Chittagong Drummers’ drums involve no electric or electronic production, Asian Dub Foundation typically emphasizes electric guitar and bass, as well as digitally sampled and looped instruments, voices, and percussion. (While the Drummers include five drummers and a cymbals player, Asian Dub Foundation’s five members include an MC, a bass guitarist, an electric guitarist, and two other members on turntables and synthesizers.)

The tension between Sullivan’s associating Asian Dub Foundation with tradition (albeit only partially) and Thomas’s associating the group with technology signifies critics’ confusion as to how to categorize their music. Yet another critic, Nigel Williamson of The Times, referred to British folk singers Norma Waterson and Eliza Carthy’s surprising observation following Asian Dub Foundation’s 1998 Mercury Prize nomination that the band’s music should be considered “modern British folk music:”

On the surface, it was a highly improbable description, for Asian Dub Foundation’s beats and samples could not be further removed from accordions, fiddles, and maypoles. Yet on reflection they were surely right. If there is such a thing as contemporary British folk, it has to be multicultural and it has to embrace the digital revolution.107

Williamson’s comment above is predicated on the assumption that British folk music does not limit itself to English folk music, evoking “accordions, fiddles, and maypoles.” In acknowledging the legitimacy of Asian Dub Foundation’s claim to performing British folk music, he affirms that Asian Dub Foundation, a modern British Asian group, has as much a right to British identity as English traditional musicians. Williamson’s description of Asian Dub

Foundation as folk music at first glance resonates with the Bangladesh Festival’s own desire to connect the folk traditions of the Bangladeshi performers to Asian Dub Foundation’s British Asian experience. However, while Williamson describes Asian Dub Foundation as the future of folk music in Britain, the Bangladesh Festival comes closer to re-inscribing Asian Dub Foundation’s connections their non-British, Bangladeshi pasts.108

**Bangladeshi and/or British Asian? The 000 Exhibition at Whitechapel Gallery**

A publicity brochure for the Bangladesh Festival offered this invitation from the festival’s director, Anne Hunt, who references Bangladesh’s rich and established traditions in music, storytelling, dance, and visual arts, all of which served as the focus of the Bangladesh Festival.

“Take a fresh look at Bangladesh. The Festival presents the sights and sounds which make this country unique, from traditional saffron-robed singers, storytellers and hill tribe dancers to contemporary poetry and poignant cinema. Check out the latest British Asian visual arts and music; sample the exquisite textiles and traditional paintings of Bangladesh; and savour some of its fabulous dishes in our Food Festival as Bengali culture comes of age.”109

Hunt alludes to the “latest British Asian visual arts and music,” and in doing so implies that these visual arts and music represented—or at least closely related to—either Bangladeshi cultural traditions or the cultural traditions of the British Bangladeshi population in East London.

The following section on the 000 exhibition will interrogate the degree to which so-called British Asian visual arts, featured in the exhibition,

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108 Only one member of Asian Dub Foundation, the MC Deedar Zaman, is of Bangladeshi descent; Aniruddha Das, the bassist, is of Indian Bengali heritage.
represents or relates to Bangladeshis or British Bangladeshis in East London as proffered by the Bangladesh Festival. The name “zerozerozero” was intended to evoke the new millennium, but it also looked back toward the concept of zero, which is widely acknowledged as an Indian contribution.\textsuperscript{110} 000 was timed to coincide with the Bangladesh Festival; it ran from July 9 to 31 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, which is located next to Brick Lane, the heart of the Bangladeshi community in Tower Hamlets. Curated by the British Asian artist Gavin Fernandes and Ilze Strazdina, 000 showcased work by British Asian artists, filmmakers, photographers, musicians, and writers.

Preserving its reputation as a prestigious contemporary art gallery, the Whitechapel Art Gallery could not, as one writer put it, “get away with a fest that simply turns Bangla for three weeks.”\textsuperscript{111} The exhibition was thus intended not to present “traditional or modern Bangladesh [art] exclusively, but panoramic images of British Asian identity as conceived by today’s second generation.”\textsuperscript{112} The exhibition thus consciously distanced itself from the more traditional works in the Bangladeshi festival, and it also distanced itself from Bangladeshi culture; at the same time, the Bangladesh Festival publicity pamphlet advertised the exhibition as a corresponding event that provided “a stage for… interdisciplinary artists to challenge preconceived notions of tradition, ethnicity, difference and desire - refining what it means to be British and Asian at the turn of the century.”\textsuperscript{113}

The exhibition focused on integrating the participation of a new generation of artists, many of whom had already been recognized as rising


\textsuperscript{111}White, “Zero Zero Zero: Never Take Nothing for Granted.”

\textsuperscript{112}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{113}“The Arts Worldwide Bangladesh Festival [Publicity Pamphlet].”
stars within the mainstream British art world; they participated alongside some other more established British Asian artists, some who had been exhibiting their works in London for over two decades. Runa Islam, for example, born in 1970 in Dhaka, Bangladesh and trained at the Royal College of Art in London and the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, was one of the newer artists featured; within the course of the previous year, she had already exhibited her installation art, films, and photography at galleries in the United Arab Emirates, France, Scotland, the Netherlands, as well as Britain. Simon Tegala, born in 1973, had gained notoriety the previous years in the media after he wired himself to a personal heart monitor for two straight weeks and broadcast his heart rate on an electronic sign in central London in his work *Anabiosis*:

> Using state-of-the-art technology developed for the athletics industry, *Anabiosis* (the medical term for revival after apparent death) reflects on the ways in which modern information and communication systems affect our lives and even our understanding of what it means to be 'alive'.

Gavin Fernandes, co-curator, showed some of his work based in his experience as a fashion photographer; in his giant photographs, he reclaimed the swastika as a Hindu symbol; another photographer surveyed the interiors of English curry houses while a photojournalist showed his photographs of various political demonstrations and marches within the British Bangladeshi community. A work by photojournalist Suki Dandha featured a group of three young British Asian teenaged girls waiting on a sidewalk in Whitechapel;

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dressed in fashionable platform sandals, and self-assuredness, two wore Muslim headscarves, and one wore a burqa.

Chila Kumari Burman, on the other hand, was featured as a more established installation artist, photographer, and printer; her work has been shown in major exhibitions of Black British artists, particularly women artists, since the 1980s and typically cites her own image in ways that challenge conventional notions of femininity and Asianness. The exhibition also featured such events as readings by two prominent young authors, Hari Kunzru and Bidisha, screenings of experimental films by British Asian, and a fashion show; on one day, a panel including a television producer and fashion model convened to discuss Asians’ representation in the media.

During weekdays, the exhibition space served to carry out Whitechapel Art Gallery’s conventional function as an established gallery that focuses on work by new artists; on weekend evenings, the main exhibition space transformed into a nightclub that headlined many of the same British Asian popular artists involved in the Bangladesh Festival: State of Bengal, members of Asian Dub Foundation’s ADFED music workshop, Black Star Liner, Kingsuk Biswas, Earthtribe, Juttla, Charged, Ges-E, Usman Project, Nitin Sawhney, Badmarsh, Mo Magic, and Joi. The role of these musicians at the gallery is described below in an article in 2nd Generation magazine, which promoted the exhibition:

Bhangra Beats pumping out of the reception will be the first signal that something’s up in the state of Art. Sounding more like Sangeeta Music on Brick Lane than a cold white space, the ground floor has been handed over to… live acts… [who] will let us headbang maniacally and remind us how the media’s Brown is the New Black was born.

The brochure from the exhibition itself related a somewhat different version of the musical events, superimposed on a photograph of Bobby Friction, a well-known DJ at the time:

British-Asian music has come a long way from the full-on bhangra experience and Bollywood babes in bulging saris, with influential protagonists immersed in most contemporary genres. The 000 zerozerozero stage will host four live club nights with lead performances from Joi, State of Bengal, Nitin Sawhney and Indian Ropeman, supported by groups and resident DJs from the nation’s hottest venues.118

The magazine 2nd Generation was the brainchild of Imran Khan, then 25 years old and just emerging as a media spokesperson on British Asian culture. Debuting in 1996, the first issue of 2nd Generation featured Talvin Singh on its cover and spoke to a young, urban, multicultural audience; a blurb in the first issue claimed to “set a new agenda, one that transcends colour, one that celebrates the eclectic nature of your culture.”119 The magazine incorporated the artsy, street-inspired interface of then established style magazines such as The Face (now defunct) and i-D. Khan claimed, “The Face is very cutting edge, very hip, but very white. It doesn’t reflect the diversity of British culture enough. i-D used to do it more, but now it’s gone off on its ‘cyberspace’ trip.”120 Khan claimed that something new was happening in this newest generation of British Asians-- a statement echoed by countless media reporters writing on the trendiness of Asian-influenced style during the mid to late 1990s:

If you consider the whole concept of an Asian culture as such, it hasn’t really existed. There is no generic Asian culture. In Britain it’s been manipulated by traditionalists --- fat 40-year-olds in sequin suits playing

120 Ibid.
bhangra. But now something’s happening. The second generation are more united and kids are taking elements from everywhere. You can see it when kids switch from cockney to patois to Punjabi in one sentence.\footnote{Ibid.}

The brochure’s text argues against the popular perception of British Asian culture as a monolithic entity; more specifically, it argues against the outdated, somewhat unfashionable stereotypes that are associated with that perception and seeks to supplant it with a new definition of British Asian culture that makes little reference to the past. The accompanying photograph of Bobby Friction in make-up equally inspired by the rave scene and Hindu priests—perhaps channeling Madonna’s appearance at the 1998 MTV Video Music Awards—is geared towards a younger urban generation more steeped in British popular culture than their parents’ cultural traditions.

While artists such as Nitin Sawhney and Black Star Liner corresponded to a more “cutting edge” and consequently more marketable conception of British Asian identity that had little to do with East London Bangladeshi culture, artists such as Joi and State of Bengal who had been well established in the area since the 1980s as active participants in the League of Joi Bangla, had a more difficult time conforming to what was being proposed as the new image of British Asian identity. The following section, which focuses on the emergence of British Bangladeshi music in East London, introduces the historical reasons underlying many British Bangladeshi musicians’ distinctive relationship to British Asian culture.

The sound of British Bangladeshis

While Joi’s actual performance was cancelled due to the death of band member Haroon Shamsher, on July, 8, 1999, the fact that they along with State
of Bengal were included in the 000 music performances represented one of the most concrete connections with the East London Bangladeshi community. As detailed in Chapter 2, 1999 witnessed the highpoint of British Asian popular musicians and so-called “Asian Underground” music. The two bands, Joi, and State of Bengal, both released albums in 1999; although Joi, unlike State of Bengal, had no formal connections to the Anokha club and its associated “Asian Underground” compilation recording, they were an established act in their own right.

Originating from the Joi Bangla movement and then branching out on separate projects as the Joi Bangla Sound System, brothers Haroon and Farook Shamsher mixed bhangra and traditional Bengal folk music with James Brown, hip hop, and acid house. With respect to asserting a specific Bangladeshi identity in their music, the Shamshers noted that in the early days, they “wanted to extend [their music’s appeal] to [those identifying with] India and Pakistan,” and that their “ideals were all-Asian” at that point. One of the ways they attempted to draw non-Bengali speakers to their music was to avoid using too many lyrics in their tracks, “because they would send people off in a certain direction.”122 The Shamsher brothers’ desire to extend the “Joi Bangla” mission to other groups of people reflects their belief that the predicament of the Bangladeshi people during their struggle for independence is one that other groups of people relate to on a broader level.

Joi seems to advocate a less specific conception of British Bangladeshi identity whose universal ideals resonate with a wider audience. The Shamshers, however, do acknowledge their father, a traditional “Bangoli” flutist, as a formative influence. Their father was the owner of the first

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122 Mohaiemen, *Joi: Bengali Boys from East London*. 
Bangladeshi tape shop in Brick Lane, the Reena Sari & Music Center. The Shamshers witnessed their father playing music with other traditional musicians as they were growing up; as part of the Joi Bangla League Sound System, they mixed the music from their father’s traditional Bangladeshi music cassette tapes with more contemporary Western popular music:

Back then, it was really racist, so people didn’t mix. We really wanted to use the band to bring people together... So we would be playing James Brown, Michael Jackson, and they would be dancing away—and we would slip in a little bit of Amiruddin on top, and before they knew it, they would be dancing away. Amiruddin wasn’t a dance beat, but technically it does have a tempo that you can match with the dance tempo, and the chants, so you can get it to match.123

After Joi broke from the League of Joi Bangla, they moved away from an exclusive focus on British Bangladeshi identity and released sporadic recordings through the mid 1990s. They released an acid house single, called “Taj Mahouse” under the name Joi in 1988 and began an “Asian night” at the Bass Clef club in London.124 In 1993, they released another single, “Desert Storm,” a reference to the 1990 Gulf War. “Desert Storm” was named the NME Single of the Week, and it appeared that Joi had finally “made it” when NME described it as “one of the most inventive dance records ever made.”125 They did not release very much in the years that immediately followed however. Their “big break” arrived when they were signed onto Peter Gabriel’s Real

123 Ibid. Given that the Joi brothers were born in the mid to late 1960s and that “Amiruddin”’s music is presently impossible to locate, the brothers may actually have been referring to the eminent Bengali folk singer, Abbasuddin Ahmed, who lived from 1901-1959; Abbasuddin was one of the first widely recorded singers of Bengali folk music, and his recordings were very popular in the 1930s and 40s. See “Our Talents,” The Daily Star [Dhaka], October 22, 2004.
124 It is useful to mention that the Bass Clef later became the Blue Note, which was the eventual home of Talvin Singh’s Anokha club night.
125 Nation Records: Artists: Joi (Nation Records, [n.d.][cited July 10 2005]); available from http://www.nationrecs.demon.co.uk/artistshtm/joi.htm. The recording features the lyrics “Can’t stop, Won’t stop” repeated over a hard-edged techno groove (Rhythm King, 1993). Unfortunately, the record is out of print and difficult to acquire. Joi’s titles often had double meanings; the song “High Times” for instance referred simultaneously to a state of intoxication and recent floods in Bangladesh.
World label in the late 1990s and asked to produce a full-length album for the first time. Many of the songs on their first album *One and One is One* originated from work they had done since the early to mid 1990s, alongside newer compositions. *One and One is One* was released in March 1999 on Real World, a British world music label; the recording billed the Joi brothers as the “original Asian breakbeat fusionists,” largely on the basis of their work in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the League of Joi Bangla.

Corresponding to the brothers’ wishes to appeal to a broad range of listeners across cultural backgrounds, *One and One is One* focuses on much more loosely defined forms of identity, such as South Asian or British Asian; for example, the songs “Fingers” and “Asian Vibes” feature the British South Indian vocalist Susheela Raman, whose *sargam* improvisation derives from her training in classical Indian vocal technique.\(^{126}\) *One and One is One* only contains a few explicit references to Bangladeshi culture and language. The brothers attribute their album title to a cryptic quotation from Rabindranath Tagore’s *Metaphysical Mathematics*: “First Equation – Friendship 1+1+3[.] Here, one plus one in friendship equals three. The one plus one is in the third, that being the world. Second equation – Love 1+1=1[.] Here, one plus one in love equals one. The one plus one are the total world.”\(^{127}\) The song “Oh My People includes a vocal chorus containing the lyrics “Amar Manush,” or “my people” in Bengali, and “Joi Bani,” or “Made by Joi” features an updated electronica remix of a 1970s Ananda Shankar song, “Streets of Calcutta.”\(^{128}\)

\(^{126}\) *Sargam* is the term used to describe vocalists’ melodic improvisation on “solfége” syllables *sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni,* and *sa.* The latter song was made into a music video, which features the artists dancing in the middle of Times Square, New York, and blends together live performances at their regular club night at the Whirly-Gig in London, and a guest appearance at the Knitting Factory in New York in March, 1999. Stylishly produced, the video frames Joi as a technologically savvy, urban musical act with a diverse audience.

\(^{127}\) Liner notes, *Joi, One and One Is One* (Corsham, Wiltshire, UK: Real World Records, 1999), 1 sound disc.

\(^{128}\) Joi does not credit the actual song in its liner notes, but the song was well known at the time. Ananda Shankar (d. 1999) was the son of Uday Shankar, the subject of Chapter 1, and
The most obvious reference to Bangladeshi folk music in One and One is One occurs in the middle of the song, “Mission,” a mostly instrumental track. The song introduces a repeating vocal chant “tak-tak di-na ta-ka din,” which relates to the Hindustani classical vocal improvisation syllables, known as bols. This type of rhythmic improvisation, which varies somewhat across different regions of South Asia, is however also very much a part of Bangladeshi folk music, and their appearance in songs by both State of Bengal and Joi, especially in their 2nd album Now We Are Three released in 2001, which actually includes a song titled “Tacadin.”

In contrast to the generic Asianness of Joi’s One and One is One, State of Bengal’s album, Visual Audio, expresses a much more consistent sense of British Bangladeshi identity. Released in 1999 on the British One Little Indian label, and again in 2000 in a slightly different version on the American Six Degrees label, Visual Audio featured reworked versions of two highlights from the 1997 Anokha compilation, “Flight IC 408” and “Chittagong Chill.” “Flight IC 408” was in many people’s minds the “theme song of the Asian Underground” since its producer, Sam Zaman, featured the song in his DJ sets at the Anokha club in the mid-1990s. The popularity of Flight IC 408 rests in its ability to embody the condition of the British Asian diaspora. Its ever-shifting themes and textures produce the sense of referring to a specific space; yet this space is characterized by its inability to be confined to a single location. This space strongly evokes the sense that the space referred to is one that is found between locations. In its incorporation of recognizably South

Asian musical influences amidst a background of British electronica, it seems to bounce between referring to South Asia and to Britain. Furthermore, it defines the space spanned by alternating between those two locations as a real, inhabited space that constitutes a destination in itself—albeit a destination at which one never arrives.

The song opens with a memorable sample from an airport loudspeaker announcing the departure of an Indian Airlines flight to Calcutta. The announcement leads into a swinging, irregular metered 8 count (3+3+2), pitched percussion sample—presumably the khamak, a one-stringed accompanying instrument in Baul music. The looped sample is stuttered, stopped, and started in a manner akin to the manipulation of rhythmic samples in breakbeat music; this manipulation of the sample further interrupts the already irregular meter. The khamak is joined by the “whoosh” sound of airplanes flying overhead, and then by the simulated announcements of a flight attendant. As the attendant finishes her announcement, the preceding layers of the airplane sounds and the rhythmic drone of the khamak are joined by what sounds like the Bengali folk instrument known as the mandira, or finger cymbals, as well as a lower-pitched, highly resonant frame drum, most likely the douf. The douf is more associated with Middle Eastern traditional music. Sam Zaman of State of Bengal maintains an extensive personal collection of instruments; having grown up partly in Jordan, he was exposed to music from that area and regularly incorporates its instruments and rhythmic meters (along with traditional Bengali instruments and musical influences) into his music.\textsuperscript{130} The douf plays another separate irregularly metered rhythm, (3+2+2), against the rhythm of the khamak. These grow louder until the flight attendant enters once again to utter, “Flight…

\textsuperscript{130}Personal communication, Sam Zaman, July 3, 1999.
IC... 408.” The airport announcer’s sampled voice, “Your attention please, your attention please” then repeats a few times in a slightly altered, more metallic sounding form, which is underpinned by the dramatic entry of an entirely digital frenetic, drum and bass dance beat.

The next section’s introduction of melodic elements continues to juxtapose electronica samples and programming alongside more exotic-sounding instruments, or at times, western instruments made to sound foreign, as when a syncopated electric guitar ostinato is added to the dance beats, playing a descending cascade that outlines an exotic-sounding pentatonic scale. After a few repetitions, a stuttered sample of a high-pitched woman’s voice (often associated with Indian popular film music) is added as an additional layer. Suddenly, all the preceding layers drop out to introduce a far more relaxed, retro jazz/soul guitar riff; in its repetition, the guitar riff picks up momentum as it is joined by the digital drum and bass dance beats, as well as the douf. This relaxed guitar riff disappears to introduce a nasal, reverberating surf guitar riff; its pitches circle around e¹ (d¹ e¹ f#¹ g¹ f#¹ e¹ d¹#¹ b) and include the characteristic augmented 2nd interval between D# and C natural, used to connote an exotic, Orientalist affect, but also surf-guitar melodies. Its ironic inclusion in this song conflates the ocean wave sounds associated with 1960s surf music with the whooshing sounds of the airplane; the effect of the theme’s entrance and fading out almost connotes flying over an exotic, Middle Eastern landscape—a conceivable flight plan on a journey from London to Calcutta.

The constantly shifting textures and sampled “whoosh” of the airplane can be heard as the stylized sound of movement and of travel. The song in effect acts as the plane that takes the listener on the journey. The listener is invited quite explicitly to partake in the journey at the start of the song, and as
one moves from one texture to one another, the listener has the sense of flying over different lands and cultures but never settling down on any of them, on the ground. The initial entry of the khamak sets this tone from the beginning; the exotic, foreign sounding folk rhythm stokes the listener’s anticipation of entering a new cultural space. Yet these foreign sounding elements alternate throughout the song with the more “British” drum and bass dance beats and catchy vocal samples; the musical evocation of space in which these influences blend and bounce off one another was an apt description for how British Asian diasporic youth experience cultures; South Asia and Britain are far from separate experiences, but rather, the fictional destination and arrival points on a never ending journey.

More specific Bengali allusions occur throughout the album. The song “Chittagong Chill,” also featured on the Anokha compilation, takes its name from a major city in southern Bangladesh; it incorporates many of the same instrumentation and stylistic elements as “Flight IC 408,” that is, drum and bass, jazz/soul guitar riffs, surf guitar, as well as a prominent jazz saxophone throughout; in addition, a break towards the end features Zaman’s voice chanting “Ki Ka ki-ke, Ki Ka ki-ke Ko-ko,” a rhythmic bol, followed by “B to the E to the N to the G to the A to the L,” a naming practice more associated with early hip hop MCs.

“Taki Naki” and “Mishti Dance” are two other songs that explicitly evoke Bengali folk music through their incorporation of rhythmic bols. “Taki Naki” includes the following lyrics as its main chorus: Taki Naki Naki Din, Taki Naki Naki Din [roll, repeat]… Dina Dina Naki Din Din. Dina Taki Naki Din Din!” These lyrics, chanted in unison by both male and female voices, are superimposed on sustained vocal drones, a western string ensembles, and a tabla accompaniment; halfway through, a drum and bass dance beat increases
the song’s rhythmic intensity. “Mishti Dance,” (or “Sweets” Dance,) is a mostly instrumental piece that features traditional rhythms on folk instruments; in the middle, we hear a seemingly drunken voice chanting “Tak Dina Din! Arre Bhai [“Come on, Brother”], Tak Dina Din!” The joyful, seemingly intoxicated voice and the swaying, irregularly grouped cyclic rhythms played on folk instruments suggest the mystical songs of the Bauls.

Unlike Joi, State of Bengal believes that songs that incorporate the Bengali language can nevertheless signify an ideal of inclusivity (of all South Asian ethnicities) as can those in other languages. The re-release of Visual Audio on the Six Degrees label features the song “Burn Your Toes.” The song opens with a young woman’s voice, improvising on a scale as in an *alaap* of an Indian classical composition, followed by the entry of a funk-influenced, drum and bass groove. The lyrics (except for an understated vocal chant of “Burn Your Toes,”) are entirely in Bengali.

Sam Zaman incorporated the voice of a young British Bangladeshi teenager, Suzanah Ansari, for this particular song. Although he has worked with many well-known, established producers and musicians in the past, Zaman still considers his connection to young people, particularly British Asians, as an important part of his work as a musician. He has in various interviews explained that he works with young, lesser-known Asian singers and other instrumentalists for his songs to introduce them to the business of making music; he appears very conscious of his potential to act as a role model within the East London Bangladeshi community and affirm positive conceptions of Bangladeshi identity--an attitude that is strongly rooted in the community activist politics associated with groups such as Joi Bangla, of which he was part originally.”

131 Personal Communication, Sam Zaman, October 2004.
The lyrics of “Burn Your Toes” are not provided with a translation; they are, in fact, darker than one would expect given the energetic, albeit minor mode of the melody. The speaker reveals an anger seething within her, even though she appears silent to others: “Mukh dukkhe kore amar mon jole. [While my face is sad, my thoughts are burning].” At the end of the song, her anger has apparently escaped from her mind to destroy the landscape around her; she looks around her as everything around her burns, and a hot wind sets a street dog afire. The lyrics and their title suggest the dangerous potential for this woman, who hides her anger and passion within herself, to destroy those around her, perhaps without even being aware of her own power. The playful melody of the song and its accompaniment seem to deny the violence implied by the lyrics, and the tension between them sets our expectations for what will follow. The song features the drumming and scat vocals of American percussionist Marque Gilmore against a rhythmic chorus that suggests *bols* as much as jazz-derived scat singing. As the song progresses, the layers of rhythmic and melodic activity increase in number until they approach a near-chaotic density; this density both complements the increasingly violent images evoked by the lyrics and threatens to overwhelm the simplicity of the original melody.

All of these songs’ contemporary themes rework Bangladeshi folk influences and lyrics to a British electronic music setting. By 1999, Joi and State of Bengal’s songs were simultaneously an expression of local East London Bangladeshi culture, and a sign of British Asian music’s commercial success and mainstream popularity. Joi and State and Bengal were obvious candidates for evening performances in the Whitechapel Gallery, as they were personally rooted in East London, had both established a following through their recordings and regular live appearances as DJs, and were at the time at the
height of their popularity after having released full-length solo albums on major British labels.

Their presence was intended to provide a much needed link between the glamour then associated with the Asian Underground and local Bangladeshi youth, most of whom had never set foot in the elite Whitechapel Gallery even though they walked past it each day. The musicians’ connection to Brick Lane and its surroundings succeeded in bringing together a full house of people from all over London who had never set foot in the gallery: typical younger, museum goers, middle to upper class British Asians, and a few young people from the area. Those that attended the evening performances were, however, for the most part not the same people who visited the exhibitions.

**Whitechapel as Local Culture**

Given that the Whitechapel Gallery regularly hosts prestigious contemporary art exhibitions, the Gallery is not a space where people who live around Brick Lane and the surrounding area feel comfortable. Mo White of 2nd Generation, a magazine that sponsored the exhibition, noted the following: “As a gallery, the Whitechapel was originally designed to serve the community. And with the local kids growing up fast these days, it’s certainly time that Bangla got a look in.” 132 In an effort to engage the British Bangladeshi population in Tower Hamlets, the shows were publicized in numerous magazines and newspapers, including London’s Time Out, which co-sponsored the exhibition, and The Eastern Eye, an Asian weekly tabloid-style newspaper.

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The exhibition also included some other direct engagements with “the community.” As I visited the 000 exhibition one day, I noticed a flyer announcing that people could convene to be taken on a tour of the area by local Bangladeshi young people. When I later mentioned this announcement with two younger British Bangladeshi friends, also from the area, they started to laugh. One of them explained, “What are they going to show you? ‘My friend pushes dope on this corner, this is where I got knifed, this is where you can get cheap drugs...?’” As they pointed out, the tour that the Whitechapel Gallery was offering to their patrons limited itself to a celebratory, and therefore sanitized version of Brick Lane and its everyday residents.

Instead, I took a walk around the area with them to experience what they thought was worth visiting. We visited the Spitalfields Market; on that weekend, the Spitalfields Community Festival was taking place. We walked into the giant market shed (since torn down) and found an older group of people in folding chairs listening to a performance of traditional Bengali music. The colorful banner advertising the festival behind them was bilingual, and women at nearby tables sold traditional crafts and clothing from Bangladesh. We stopped at the Sweet’n’Spicy for lunch; one of the oldest informal Indian/Bangladeshi restaurants in the area, the small space is in the heart of Brick Lane and features brightly colored poster paintings of somewhat pudgy, barely clothed Indian wrestlers. Next we walked by the former Truman Brewery at the other end of Brick Lane, then converted into the popular Vibe Bar and some other upscale shops; a new furniture design store had opened, and one could only enter by stooping down and crawling through a lighted tunnel; once we entered the space, we encountered an exhibition of furniture made out of the thinnest paper imaginable amidst the
recorded sound of chirping crickets. The space was more a gallery for avant-garde furniture design than a shop and was indicative of the then new development of the area into an upscale, trendy area catering more to Londoners with considerable disposable income.

On the days I would walk through Brick Lane on my own, I was often one of the few South Asian woman on the street; conservative Muslim Bangladeshi women would most likely have been found in their homes at that time of day. Small shops, including groceries, Muslim religious stores, music and clothing stores, as well as clothing manufacturers and import/export outfits line the streets.

Illustration 3.3 Groceries in Brick Lane, July 1999
Walking near the Brick Lane Mosque, formerly a synagogue, one would see many bearded men in the traditional white thobe and taqiyah (long robe and
cap.) At night, the scene would change; young, white Londoners would walk from one club and restaurant to another. Hawkers in front of each Indian (or rather Bangladeshi, as most “Indian” restaurants are in East London,) would call out to those passing by to come into their restaurant. The figure below depicts the popular City Spice restaurant, which specializes (as noted on its awning) in the “Master Cuisine of Bangladesh.” For years, Bangladeshis had opened and defined the Indian restaurant industry. At the end of the 1990s, restaurants had opened that explicitly affirmed the Bangladeshi cultural identity of their cooks and owners.

Illustration 3.4 City Spice Restaurant, Brick Lane and Woodseer Street, July 1999

While some outsiders were familiar with Brick Lane as a nightspot, many of these people would find Brick Lane during the day an entirely different
cultural space. The 000 exhibition’s physical proximity, temporal overlap, and shared performers with the Bangladesh Festival made it difficult to distinguish for many visitors between the exhibition and the Festival’s respective events and performances, thus forging a connection between the two events. The overwhelming effect for visitors who experienced both events was an enfolding of specifically Bangladeshi identity within a generic British Asian identity.

This conflation is clearly evident in an article by Tim Marsh, a reporter with The Times. In an article entitled, “When Cultures Collide,” Marsh alternates between writing about the Bangladesh Festival and the 000 exhibition as interchangeable events, and as a single collective event. For example, he extols the scale of the Bangladesh Festival that was about to begin, but adds, “amid the traditional music and costumes is art that isn’t afraid to shock and artists who won’t be pigeonholed”—making a clear reference to the 000 exhibit.133 Marsh interprets these events’ overlapping schedules and proximity as their attempts to revitalize “Asian Pride.” The area had suffered a setback after Brick Lane was targeted by a white supremacist in a nail bomb attack a few months earlier.

Marsh notes that the organizers of the 000 exhibition had to “overcome initial skepticism from... the British Asian artists involved.” Immediately afterward, he quotes Deedar Zaman, who comments, “We’ve done these things all our lives and they’ve just been flops.”134 It should be noted that Zaman was scheduled to appear at Asian Dub Foundation’s performance at the Barbican (with the Bauls and the Chittagong Drummers)—a highlight of the Bangladesh Festival that had no relation to the 000 exhibition itself. Marsh

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133 Marsh, “When Cultures Collide.”
134 Ibid.
appears to conflate the nature of particular participants’ reluctance to represent Bangladeshi and British Asian culture, respectively; in doing so, he unintentionally brings the tensions between British Asian and Bangladeshi identity to the fore. Zaman’s cynicism is not entirely unrelated to that of the exhibition’s participants, but Marsh’s conflation of the two festivals and their participants suggests that the exhibition and festival organizers’ attempts to distinguish their events from one another was lost on the general public.

Zaman’s reluctance to participate is mentioned alongside the misgivings of Simon Tegala, a conceptual artist who is of the most well known of the artists featured in the 000 exhibition:

When the Whitechapel [Gallery] first approached me I thought, ‘Hello, this is dodgy territory’ – mainly because the reason for being invited was not specifically down to my work but because of my cultural background... I don’t really address issues of identity... in my work. I don’t want to be labelled as an Asian artist, I want to be labelled as an artist who happens to be Asian. I think there is quite a difference.”

Mo White in 2nd Generation explained the organizers were already sensitive to Tegala and other artist’ concerns.

Aware of the negative reception and pigeon-holing that a directly Asian tag may cause, zerozerozero has taken the abstract zero as its emblem. The title’s subtext informs us that as a concept, zero, originated in the Indian sub-continent. And more importantly, like the second generation itself, not to mention the artists involved, zero is an integral part of the year 2000.

Evoking the name of the exhibition, White’s attributing zero to South Asia helps define India and South Asia as places that were advanced enough to produce mathematical concepts that were crucial to the development Western science and technology. At the end, however, White’s comment sounds somewhat glib; drawing attention back to the name of the exhibition, she

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135 Ibid.
almost suggests that very little, if anything—zero—of substance unifies the artists and musicians who were featured in the exhibition.

**Brown is the New Black—for some: Conclusion**

In the following passage from Moncure Conway’s novel, *Travels in South Kensington*, published in 1882, we encounter two men setting out to visit the South Kensington Museum (renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1899):

‘Come’ said my friend, Professor Omnium, one clear morning, ‘let us take an excursion round the world’... ‘My dear friend’, said I, ‘it is among my dreams one day to visit India, China, Japan, California, but at present you might as well ask me to go with you to the moon.’ ‘You misunderstand’, replies Professor Omnium ‘I do not propose to leave London. We can never go round the world, except in a small, limited way, if we leave London... Ten thousand people and a dozen governments have been at infinite pain and expense to bring the cream of the East and of the West to your own doors.’

The passage above reminds us of the long history behind the staging of such events as the Bangladesh Festival and 000 exhibition—events whose ultimate purpose is to represent and recreate respective cultures for audiences mostly unfamiliar with those cultures. The Bangladesh Festival was quite explicit about its attempts to recreate a virtual Bangladesh thousands of miles away from its original source, a project that in the context of Britain’s colonial history recalls the extensive history of colonial exhibitions, as well as the Victoria & Albert museum, which affirmed the power of the British Empire by showcasing the riches of its subjects’ cultures. Several scholars have already pointed to the inconstancies and contradictions inherent in those attempts to

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represent colonized cultures, the fact that some of these inconsistencies and contradictions persist reflects that we still tend to represent cultures as whole in colonially informed models. That the Bangladesh Festival, which had intended to focus on engaging Bangladeshi youth of East London, lapsed into reiterated colonial models of representation, that is, “authentic” exhibitions of Bangladeshi culture for British mainstream audiences, is not so much a surprise. What is more surprising is what motivated this reiteration, namely the specter of current British Asian identity associated with the proximate 000 exhibition at the Whitechapel. The legitimacy and appeal of Bangladeshi culture could only be promoted in a way that clearly distinguished it from the more contemporary and hybrid forms of art associated with the exhibition of British Asian identity and culture at the Whitechapel Gallery. The Whitechapel Gallery’s 000 exhibition was less explicit in its attempts to recreate a miniaturized representation of an entire culture, as associated in the colonial exhibitions discussed in Chapter 1. The Gallery faced a formidable challenge in attempting to represent a concept so nebulous as “British Asian identity” and reacted by defining British Asian culture in definite terms that focused on British Asians’ roles as the avant-garde pioneers of British culture; in doing so, the Whitechapel Gallery celebrated British Asian identity in particular terms that excluded the majority of British Asian people.

British Asian musicians performed a crucial function in both the Bangladesh Festival and the 000 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery. The identities conflated within the convenient term “British Asian” encompassed those identities that had achieved significant economic and social success, and to a substantially lesser degree, those who had not. Most significantly, the socioeconomic exclusion of certain identities from the term “British Asian” translated into the ethnic exclusion of Bangladeshis from the celebratory narrative of British Asian identity. Those who were successful were fêted in the mainstream press as the bright future of the British Asians, and those who were not were at most times ignored and effectively alienated from that identity. The 000 exhibition served as a platform to honor and praise these more celebratory identities; the Bangladesh Festival sought to introduce a wider audience to the culture of Bangladesh, and to the Bangladesh immigrant population in London.

British Asian musicians, and British Bangladeshi musicians in particular, were intended to form links between the two events, but more accurately, they were enlisted in order to address the events’ most profound shortcomings. British Bangladeshi musicians such as State of Bengal and Joi were sought for their ability to stand in for the Bangladeshi community that was otherwise absent. The Bangladesh Festival, in its efforts to present an appealing, traditionally authentic Bangladeshi culture, often ended up excluding the very population of East London British Bangladeshis that the Festival was intended to engage—for in the organizers’ eyes, these diasporic residents had lost their claims to authenticity. In a similar manner, the presence of British Bangladeshi musicians at the Whitechapel Gallery highlighted the tension between the Gallery’s location in the heart of the
Bangladeshi community, and those residents’ common reluctance to enter a space that they considered to be culturally, economically, and socially alien to their own interests.

The presence of British Bangladeshi musicians at the Bangladesh Festival was partly intended to provide a bridge from a more ethnologically oriented Bangladeshi folk festival to contemporary East London street culture, particularly in the case of the Asian Dub Foundation’s collaboration with the Chittagong Drummers. Yet the appearance of British Asian musicians and particularly British Bengali musicians at Whitechapel gallery resulted in more contradictions than resolutions. The curators of the exhibition perhaps assumed that the commercial success and recognition associated with electronic club musicians such as Joi and State of Bengal would or could translate into their being considered highbrow artists who deserved as much respect as the visual artists featured in the 000 exhibition, many of whom had already shown their work in the most prestigious British galleries.

While the clash of club culture and the museum space at Whitechapel could be considered potentially disastrous, the curators of 000 may have viewed the integration of British Asian musicians as one way to reclaim the elitist British cultural space of Whitechapel Gallery as a younger and more stylish gathering place of people from different ethnic backgrounds. Instead the musicians’ presence often associated them a little too closely with the British Bangladeshi culture literally outside the gallery’s doors—instead of British Asian culture. The gallery sees the sponsorship of events such as 000 associated with British ethnic minorities as a vital public service; in this case, they seemed to suggest that focusing on British Asian cultural achievements was serving the “community” immediately outside their doors. In this case,
however, the presence of British Bangladeshi musicians served to reiterate the frequent distinction between British Asian and British Bangladeshi culture.

Each of the musical events that featured British Bangladeshi musicians posed countless contradictions between highly artificial constructions of Bangladeshi and British Asian identity on one side, and lived experience on the other; between idealized museum replicas of cultural highpoints, and chaotic histories on the ground. While the events incorporated British Bangladeshi musicians in an attempt to resolve those contradictions, in the end, these musicians’ presence had the effect of highlighting the tensions inherent within each event.