

AESTHETIC FUSIONS:
BRITISH ASIAN MUSIC AND DIASPORA CULTURE

Nilanjana Bhattacharjya, Ph.D.

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During the mid to late 1990s, popular musicians of South Asian heritage including Nitin Sawhney, Talvin Singh, and State of Bengal were recognized as a significant force in British electronic club music. Music produced within the British Asian diaspora had until then been largely unrecognized within mainstream British culture. The rise of these musicians— often referred to as “Asian Underground”—was new by virtue of their originating largely *outside* these British Asian communities, and their circulating in British mainstream culture.

The recognition of this music within mainstream British culture served to negotiate these musicians’ claims to national and cultural belonging. Their claims to British, South Asian, and British Asian identities were defined through a number of factors. Politically, these factors included the history of British colonialism and decolonization in South Asia; immigration and racial politics in Britain; and Britain’s recent efforts to reinstate itself as a global economic power. Commercially, these factors included South Asian trends in fashion; the marketing of British Asian musicians in association with the category of “world music”; and their participation in prominent music award ceremonies. Aesthetically, these factors included these musicians’ fusing of particular styles, genres, and cultural traditions from South Asia as well as their integration of then cutting-edge trends in electronica music and digital music production.

The confluence of these factors coupled with these musicians’ physical location in Britain resulted in these musicians’ inability to be situated within

an established tradition-modernity binary—through which “tradition” has been associated with South Asian culture, and modernity with British or Western culture. Furthermore, these musicians’ relation to that binary reveals their participation in a longer history of discourse surrounding British Asian diasporic musicians that questions the chronology and location of globalization as it is conventionally understood. I identify the Indian dancer Uday Shankar as constructing an archetype for the contemporary British Asian diasporic musician as early as the 1920s. Lastly, I specify how this discourse affects how people listen to and comprehend the music produced by British Asian popular musicians, as well as these musicians’ cultural and political identities.