

Bhangra in the Global Bazaar

Anjali Gera Roy

Even though Adorno might be considered out of date after the Frankfurt School's decline, popular cultural debates in the Euro-American academy continue to return to Adorno's originary text on mass culture. When it has become customary to counterpoise Mark Poster's celebratory narrative against the Frankfurt School's misplaced anxieties about mass culture and media, John Hutnyk's attempt to reinstate Adorno in his critique of the reification of third world cultural productions in World Music in his essay 'Adorno at Womad' comes as a surprise. Conceding his complicity in this process as a spectator at Womad, Hutnyk invokes Adorno's authority in unravelling the mechanics of the culture industry. He argues that though one might disagree with Adorno over details, his central argument about the commodification of culture still holds.

Different aspects of Bhangra's commodification have engaged the attention of Bhangra aficionados across the globe. The Euro-American spectator's concern is about its othering as World Music; the Indian elite's contempt is rooted in distaste for the popular; and Punjabi horror stems from the sacrilegious act of its removal from the sacred to the profane. Beginning with the assumption that commodification is the price folk performance has had to pay for its survival in the age of trans-national imperialism; I shall isolate the mode and manner of Bhangra's commodification.

The debate on Bhangra's reification in the Euro-American academy is largely framed within a post-modern, post-colonial cultural theory discourse, which expresses deep concern about the ethnographic, anthropologising and sociologising overtones in the Euro-American expression of interest in the cultural products of non-western societies. Cultural theorists writing on this issue express their misgivings about the elision of genuine Western interest in the cultural heritage of its others with its appropriation by a global culture industry. Yet the frame of World Music or Asian Dance Music through which Bhangra is received in Europe and America displays a convergence between the salvage ethnography school of ethnomusicology and a savaging global music market. This was Ashwani Sharma's contention in his essay on World Music, where he had remonstrated against the ethnographic impulse undergirding even contemporary valorisations of non-Western music. Philip Bohlan's short introduction to *World Music* unambiguously, which employs the ethnographic trope of encounter to describe his discovery of World Music, appears to be one such valorisation. Though Bohlan, the ethnomusicologist sensitive to the epistemologies and ontologies of music, begins with problematising not only the difference in the categories but the epistemologies of music in different cultures, he, too, is culpable of privileging place over form that Timothy Brennan objects to in the label World Music. Though its attention to the epistemologies and ontologies of music from elsewhere separates ethnomusicologist interest in World Music from its appropriation by global sonic markets, ethnomusicology begins the process of exoticising others' music, which the industry converts into a unique selling proposition. The germ of corruption, however, lies in the terminology, which the music industry borrowed as a user-friendly classificatory label to enable the 'other-friendly'

buyer to browse through the record store. Timothy Brennan's definition of World Music as a "longing in metropolitan centres of Europe and North America for what is not Europe or North America" (45) corroborates the orientalist allegation made against the label. Brennan locates in this longing, "a general, usually positive, interest in the cultural life of other parts of the world found in all of the major media", a meta text of desire, escape and self-constitution recalling earlier imaginings of the European self in relation with others. Arguing that the term is used to describe "local or regional music that either does not travel well, or has no intention to travel", he concludes that World Music "does not exist". Brennan's problem with World Music is its homogenisation of non-Western difference through yoking together totally dissimilar categories, for instance, of Indian classical music with Irish folk music. Treading the middle path, Brennan neither joins the cheerleading section of cultural theory nor hails the arrival of an equal world. Nor does he reiterate a cultural imperialist concern about cultural glottophobia. He locates himself as a white, male consumer of non-Western music whose pleasure in listening or buying music overrules his ethical qualms about the violence in intervening in others' cultural development. Adopting a similar posture, of the consumer of World Music, Hutnyk wonders if the visibility provided to World Music artists by commercial interests in festivals like Womad catapults them in global sonic commerce. Hutnyk argues that the space created by World Music does not "escape the dominance of commodity fetish forms" and that music such as Bally Sagoo's makes a space claiming gesture for Asian music in mainstream popular culture "through the capital market itself".

On the Indian subcontinent, cultural theorists have adopted a high modernist stance and displayed an Adornoesque horror of popular cultural products. Adorno's caveats against mass culture may be heard almost verbatim in the litany about the alleged 'degeneration' in musical tastes as reflected in the popularity of the film and other light music in which Bhangra is included. As Bhangra enters the popular sphere, it is dismissed with the derogatory gesture directed at all mass cultural products. The concerns about Bhangra's commodification on the Indian subcontinent combine Hutnyk's Adornoesque *angst* about the fetishisation of non-Western music with Brennan's post-colonial anxieties about the submergence of generic difference. Contemporary Indian musical consciousness is defined in the typically Adornoesque nightmare of a split between the high and the folk, the aesthetic and the ascetic, entertainment and pleasure. As high and folk art begin to be defined by 'displeasure in pleasure', popular culture acquires pure entertainment value even as the enjoyment it promises is simultaneously denied. Adopting a typical Frankfurt school line, cultural critics dismiss popular cultural products while lamenting the decline in musical tastes, standardization of cultural products, the personality cult, the regressive character of listening, and the passivity of the masses. Popular culture is seen as destabilizing the harmonious relationship between the high and the low cultural spheres in which the low served as a sort of introduction and preparation for the high. Indian folk cultures, assigned a supplementary role in the Great / Little traditional interdependence theory are seen as violating this hierarchy through their domination of the popular sphere. A simple reversal of popular and high, a standard post-modern practice, cannot elucidate Bhangra's decentring of the Indian cultural universe. In my opinion, the fetishisation of vulgarity manifests a deep-seated phobia about the dissolution of boundaries and taste hierarchies concomitant upon the folk's insertion into the popular. As Punjabi folk music

transmogrifies into its new popular avatar, it becomes the object of diatribes against popular culture.

Bhangra mutants are undoubtedly implicated in global capitalism, operating as transnational and electronic imperialism. However, denunciations of “the fetish character” of Bhangra music display a peculiar fetish that directs this debate away from more disquieting issues. Resistance to Bhangra hybrids on the Indian subcontinent has rallied around the ‘vulgarisation’ charge, in which visual promiscuity is invariably read as a mass or alien cultural attribute. As vulgarity is normally a thin dividing line defined by a society’s permissive limits, one could do well to focus on the more obscene gesture in its vulgarisation, that is, in its opening out to the *vulgaris*, the common folk. Bhangra’s ‘obscenity’ is the effect of its expulsion from the sacred ritual enclosure to the profane mass culture arena. Bhangra’s vulgarisation is imbricated with its decontextualisation and deterritorialisation, which open the door to its fetishisation. Bhangra acquires its fetish character in the moment of its translation from ritual to spectacle as it transmutes from harvest ritual to popular music. I locate this moment in the birth of the professional artist and paid performance, which introduce a spectator performer divide mirrored in the spatial configuration of the staged performance. Arguing that Bhangra’s objectification began in the substitution of its use value by exchange value in professional Bhangra performance, I shall follow it to its natural limits in the commodity cultures of global capitalism attributing its reification to the *field* rather than the genre.

On the face of it, all of Adorno’s caveats about mass culture appear to be true with respect to Bhangra. As folk culture, it had never had any pretensions to the seriousness reserved for Indian classical traditions. With its descent into the popular sphere, particularly as dance music, it becomes emblematic of background listening, which Adorno saw as the first sign of regressive listening. Bhangra’s foot tapping rhythms make it the most preferred music on the dance floor. Its inherent sensuality, reigned in by the ascetic aesthetic dialectic of the classical folk divide is unshackled in the popular cultural space where it interrogates advanced art forms defining themselves through the denial of the sensory. The underlying assumption in standard denunciations of mass culture is that economic interest is inimical to creativity, individuality and authenticity. High art’s claims to superiority are propped on its disavowal of commercial interest. But the symbolic capital it accumulates through the denial of commercial interest is converted into economic capital in the marketing of high art. Bhangra introduces a note of disjuncture in this law of marketing art by proving itself capable of resisting and signifying cultural authenticity even while sullyng itself through its trafficking in popular culture. The questions of artistic freedom and innovation, musical purity and authenticity, communal responsibility are repeated with unfailing regularity in the context of the standardization of culture, and the system based on stars, fan clubs and bestsellers. Whether one laments the regressive nature of Bhangra listening or dancing or hails it as a regional/folk arrival, one cannot deny that Bhangra’s giving itself completely to consumption makes it part of the global commodity culture through and through. Its participation in the commodity dynamics of popular cultural sphere subjects it to the authoritarianism of the market. Through its implication in global capital music world of commodities, Bhangra is completely subject to the authority of commercial success.

Bhangra's production, distribution and consumption today are dictated by market demand. Emerging out of the post-industrial market economy, it is packaged and marketed like any other consumerist item. The music, the artist and the genre are invested with a mystique that the advertising industry is wont to do with other products.

Defining the present phase of production as the era of the brand, Naomi Klein argues that the production and consumption of commodities today is secondary to the manufacturing of the brand. Bhangra's reification in global commodity marts offers the most successful instance of brand marketing in recent marketing history. Building on the theory of market segmentation, Bhangra creates a niche for itself both in the national and the global music market by its unique positioning. In the popular cultural advertising lingua, Bhangra is packaged as a global brand with a particular local appeal that cannot be copied by any competition. Since Bhangra's unchallenged position in the global sonic market depends on its brand marketing, individual and generic acceptance is interlinked with its conformity to the total brand image and positioning. The brand image created for Bhangra by the music industry plays on its generic ethnicity, rusticity, and folk antecedents. Bhangra is able to penetrate both the national and global popular musical sphere because of its special positioning as the non-technologised sound of a peasant culture and society uncorrupted by modernity. Even Bhangra hybrids, which mix synthesizers with traditional instruments like *dhol* and *tumbi* work by the play on the contrast between the modern and the traditional, the pristine and the mixed, the rural and the urban. As the ethno-cultural signifier of a Punjabi or Asian ethnicity in and outside India respectively, Bhangra is dragged into the promotion of an authenticity cult based on origins. As Bhangra genres, which fit in with its joyous, high-energy peasant song brand appeal, are privileged by the Bhangra industry over others, Bhangra artists play it safe by sticking to the tested formula resulting it in a highly standardized market. Not only are particular artists privileged who conform to its popular image, but also musical content is determined by the overall brand image. Further, the artist's persona and life is created in keeping with the brand personality. Call it powerful brand creation or brand domination but whenever Bhangra tries to break out of the brand stereotyping, it bombs in the popular music charts. Br-Asian or Punjabi objections to Bhangra's stereotyping as Asian or Punjabi music are on grounds of its homogenisation of differences within various Bhangra genres and practitioners. But Bhangra texts "fall completely into the world of commodities, are produced for the market, and are aimed at the market" (Adorno, 38). The rules of the "commodity market" demand that, in delivering itself "over to consumption for the price for its wages" (35), Bhangra relinquish its prerogative as folk music to take on high culture. The contemporary Bhangra boom is primarily a marketing miracle wrought by a global marketing, distribution and media network in which the local music industry and artists are equally complicit. It would be simplistic to view Bhangra's reification as a product of global trans-national conglomerates cannibalising third world artists and industry to serve Euro-American consumerist interests. Protests against Bhangra's commodification by Western musical marts are predicated on the assumption of hapless third world musical artists held to thrall by the Western music industry with the promise of big bucks and bigger name. The ground reality in the Bhangra industry is quite different.

It is time to talk about the Indian music industry's role in the marketing of Bhangra music. Bhangra boom in India has been created by 'its return back home' from the Punjabi diaspora in Britain colliding with the ascendance of the regional on the national popular cultural landscape. Gurdas Mann, Apache Indian or Malkit Singh arrived in India and stormed the Indian popular cultural space in the eighties by an uncanny coincidence. The marketing whiz kids of the Indian music industry were faced with a challenge similar to that posed to the Western music market. They were required to concoct a magic mantra that would open the way for ethnic beats in a Hindi film music dominated industry. The same sonic environmental conditions, unfamiliarity, inferiority, difference, that had impeded ethnic Asian music's entry in the mainstream Western music market had to be addressed by regional Punjabi music to break into the Hindi dominated Indian popular cultural mainstream. Punjabi music's national success is the first space-clearing gesture of a non-film, non-Hindi performance tradition into the national popular.



*Bhangra 'Stars' in action: Harbhajan Mann, Hans Raj Hans, Gurdas Mann & Jasbir Jassi (from L to R).
Image sourced from www.tribuneindia.com/2004/20040221/windows/main1.htm*

Though both non-film and regional music had always been popular, their following was confined to small regional or taste groups. Punjabi music, for example, has always had its own die-hard fans whose adulation went into the making old Punjabi folk legends just as *ghazals* and *qawwallis* had a loyal market among the North Indian elite. But *ghazals* had a limited shelf life notwithstanding the larger than life status of *ghazal* artists like Jagjit Singh, Bhupinder, Anup Jalota, Pankaj Udhas and Peenaz Masani. *Ghazal* singers, despite their considerable standing in elite circles, could never take the film music industry head-on. Nor could they do much for the popularisation of regional musics except for the token inclusion of a regional number in their Hindi Urdu repertoire. Indipop, after Alisha Chinai, appeared to be a flash in the pan. At the time when Hindi film music virtually monopolized the popular music segment, the music industry seized on Bhangra as a magic formula for rejuvenating the satiated Indian popular music market, which appears to have worked. Whether Bhangra would also prove to be a passing trend remains to be seen but Bhangra's penetration of the national popular music market was an unprecedented feat facilitated by the music industry's marketing machinery. The music industry predictably pulled out all the stops in enlisting all components of the popular cultural machinery to begin the Bhangra-blitz. The strategies used in popularising Bhangra within the nation require a background of the organization of taste hierarchies in Indian public cultural sphere. Bhangra's marketing proceeds by the destabilization of several of these taste hierarchies that involve a more sophisticated management of tastes than a simple reversal of the high and the low.

The high low binary of the classical and folk is replicated on the Indian subcontinent in the hierarchy of Great and little traditions, which are presented as an interdependence. In musical cultures, the Great Tradition is interpreted primarily as the Hindustani and the Carnatic schools while regional and folk traditions are classified as little traditions. While the pan Indian nature of the Great Tradition ensures a familiarity and uniformity across the nation, folk and regional traditions are virtually unknown outside their own regional taste constituencies. State institutions' efforts to promote cross-regional exchange have been far from successful. The high and popular spheres in post independent India have been constructed chiefly through the great Indian classical Hindustani and Carnatic musical heritage and the Hindi film dominated popular culture. Music industry grants have catered largely to these two segments over the years splitting their repertoire between classical and Carnatic vocalists and instrumentalists in the high culture market and film music in the popular cultural segment. *Ghazal* is the only non-film light classical music promoted by the Indian music industry, which met with a degree of success particularly during the 70's and the early eighties. However, *ghazal*, like classical music, has gained a symbolic capital by its disavowal of commercial interests even though the logistics of its marketing require it to operate within the field of self-interest.

The music industry has erected a star system, regarded as an offshoot of the birth of mass culture, in the promotion of the sales of classical music albums in which the artist's or music's disavowal of commerce inversely raises their symbolic capital. The fortunes of Indian musical giants like HMV Saregama have been made through the consecration of classical music and artists, whose denial of commercial interest translates into their and the company's symbolic capital over the years. The making of legends, including internationally acclaimed ones like Ravi Shankar and Zakir Husain, is part of the music industry's brand marketing strategy. Without denying their individual talents, it is generally agreed that the irresistible Zakir Husain charm is a giant fabrication of the classical music industry and the star system. The star system and the cult of the personality have been at work even in the marketing of classical Indian music, with its high cultural associations. Popular cultural music has never made any pretensions about concealing its self-interest and has been happy to bowdlerize the classical and the folk repertoire with equal alacrity so long as the cash registers keep ringing.

Bhangra's induction into the Indian cultural sphere requires the dissolution of boundaries dividing the classical, folk and the popular. Bhangra was consecrated as Punjabi folk in the Great Little hierarchy in state sponsored cultural institutions. But the Great Little interdependency, which visualizes a folk classical continuum, was particularly protective of taste hierarchies. The folk were accorded the option of interpreting tradition at their own level without challenging the aristocracy of culture enshrined in the Great Indian Tradition. Indian music industry, upbeat after the success of Bhangra abroad and non-film music in non-Indian languages, decided to take the gamble by breaking into a new territory. Though folk and classical have frequently been co-opted into the popular in Hindi film music, the nineties mainstreaming of Bhangra as popular music was on an altogether different scale. Bhangra's mainstreaming was ironically contingent upon its

retention of ethnic/regional difference and its survival ensured by its integration into Hindi film music.

Bhangra's successful marketing has as much to do with its hybridisation with Western popular music as its retention of ethnic and folk difference. In fact, the popular music industry has a vested interest in preserving the division between classical and folk, popular and folk, Hindi and regional. Bhangra's packaging plays on the Punjabi harvest ritual's rusticity, linguistic difference and generic difference. Labelled as dance music, Bhangra is made to usher a new segment in the popular music market, which adds to the industry's sales without cutting into the primarily Hindi film music market strata.

Bhangra might have had a traditional following among Punjabi speakers and the Hindi film music satiated music industry might have been hot for the entry of non-Hindi musical traditions. But Bhangra's unprecedented success cannot be separated from its globalisation. Bhangra's 'return back home', an example of globalisation inflows, is facilitated by its global acceptance. Though the space of Western popular culture might have made room for Bhangra as World Music or Asian dance music, it repackages it in an unrecognisable form and returns it to its original producers. Bhangra returns to India as hip and exotic which, while facilitating its acceptance by westernised middle class youth, orientalises it. Regional folk music had always been at the disposal of the Indian music industry to capitalize on. But it needed a global recognition before its potential in the home market could be converted in to economic capital. The generic name Bhangra is itself of British Asian coinage, which is loosely employed to denote the particular kind of music born out of the fusion of Punjabi *dhol* beats with Afro rhythms. Traditionally, Bhangra is a performance tradition, more dance and music than song and lyrics.

Punjabi folk enters the Indian popular mainstream in its Br-Asian avatar Bhangra (which spawns its own indigenous versions such as Bhangra-pop) at the height of India's discotheque revolution. This requires that Punjabi folk (*geet*) be repositioned as dance music for the consumption of middle class urban youth. Though the dance culture has gradually percolated to the working class youth, the Bhangra revolution of the eighties' was catalysed by the discotheque boom in Indian metropolitan cities. If Bhangra, as dance music, descends into Adorno's much disapproved background listening, it also crosses the linguistic barrier. The Punjabi lyrics pose no problem when Bhangra is played as dance music in which the lyrical component is subordinated to the beat and the rhythm. While Punjabi's similarity to Hindi is cited as the reason for its smooth crossover into the Indian popular mainstream, the focus on sound rather than on lyrics accounts for its penetration in the non-Punjabi region such as the deep South where not only Punjabi but also Hindi is a foreign tongue. To the Indian youth receiving Punjabi Bhangra through the same transmission networks as Algerian *rai* or Mexican salsa, Punjabi appears as alien exotica as in the marketing of World Music, and Bhangra's ethnicisation becomes the source of its appeal. Packaging Bhangra as Punjabi music enables the Indian music industry to make a dent into the Hindi popular music market. Though the personality cult and valorisation of particular voices is also seen at work in the making of Bhangra stars, the star system is really an accessory to the exoticisation of Punjabi

difference, which creates a niche for regional traditions in the Indian popular culture¹. No matter how larger than life the reputations of the media hyped Bhangra stars and voices, their individual claim to stardom is coincident with the recognition and popularity of the genre.

Bhangra critics' narrow focus on the commodification of the female body in hybrid Bhangra performance prevents them from perceiving the commodification of the Punjabi body, voice and the self in Bhangra's national and global marketing. If the female dancers are undraped for male consumerist consumption, the Bhangra artist is draped in traditional Bhangra finery in the exoticisation of rusticity and tradition to sate global consumerist desires. Bhangra artists' urban, literate antecedents need to be downplayed in their archaification and antiquitisation. The ethnographic frame of World Music through which Bhangra is othered and exoticised is borrowed by the Indian music market to package Punjabi and folk difference for the consumption of urban middle class Indian youth. Othered and exoticised, Punjabi Bhangra fulfils the longing in the urban middle class youth for authenticity whose burden the folk music is made to bear. Bhangra also feeds the technotopia of industrial societies that makes them turn to the music of "pre-industrial" cultures. That Punjabi Bhangra's appeal depends entirely on the Bhangra artist remaining in his frame, is proved by the bombing of Bhangra legends' experiments with Hindi lyrics and new genres. The Bhangra star's appeal is predicated on the stereotype of the Punjabi in the Indian imaginary: high energy, robust rusticity, hedonistic abandon and unbridled impulse. The marketing of Punjabi music picks up the mode of racialisation in which blackness is imbued with certain stereotyped traits absent in the white, used in marketing black music in the West. The more outlandish the costume, the more incomprehensible the lyrics, the more remote the setting, the higher the sales are likely to be. The turban and the beard, the glittering Bhangra costumes, and the rustic settings all contribute to the aura surrounding Bhangra.

The notion of artistic freedom raised in the packaging of third world music for Western consumption is applicable to the Indian setting equally. The cost of popularity and commercial success in each case entails a loss of artistic freedom and compromise with lyrics, music and genre. Much has been made about the displeasure of established third world artists like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan with recording companies' tampering with their essential compositions. But even they have been ineffectual in altering the predicates of the music market and have surrendered themselves to the star system in one way or another. The artist's intuitive reaction is to rebel at the prospect of putting his creativity at the disposal of a public lacking the capacity for true appreciation that is the effect of the decontextualisation and deterritorialisation of the music. At some point, the concerns about reification of Bhangra in World Beat and Indian popular music appear to converge because in both cases, the music is produced for the enjoyment of a consumer of a certain kind.

¹ We may additionally read elements of North Indian cultural hegemony at large, and not just Punjabi cultural hegemony into this. Bollywood, despite being based in Western India geographically, is extremely North India centric – Most actors are North Indian, as is the language (Hindi) of Bollywood films and other influences. Hence, in that vein it's not so unusual for Bhangra to make it big in Bollywood.

On the face of it, all of Adorno's caveats about mass culture appear to be true with respect to Bhangra. With its origins in folk culture, it never had pretensions to the seriousness attributed to Indian classical traditions. With its descent into the popular sphere, it becomes emblematic of background listening, which Adorno sees as the characteristic of musical regression. More specifically, Bhangra's popularity, even in the popular cultural sphere, is its generic appropriation as dance music. Bhangra numbers, with their catchy, foot-taping rhythms are the greatest hits on dance floors than anywhere else. Bhangra's inherent sensuality, reigned in by the ascetic aesthetic dialectic of the classical folk binary, expresses itself as pure enjoyment in the popular cultural space interrogating those advanced forms of art that claim their status through the denial of the sensory. The traditional prerogative of folk traditions to attack "the cultural privilege of the ruling class" (Adorno, 1991: 34) must be forfeited by Bhangra² in the separation of the high and the low and the change in its function – to provide pure entertainment. As popular culture, Bhangra is "delivered over to consumption for the price of its wages" (Adorno, 35). Bhangra texts today "fall completely into the world of commodities, are produced for the market and are aimed at the market" (Adorno, 38). Through its implication in the global capitalist musical world of commodities, Bhangra is completely subject to the authority of commercial success. It wouldn't be incorrect to say that the global Bhangra boom is largely due to ingenious market strategisation capitalizing on genuine diasporic and folk cultural resistivity in promoting and authenticity cult predicated on ethnicity. Brennan, Hutnyk, Lazarus and Feld have articulated Western discomfiture in the marketing of non-western music. While Indian localities cannot escape global sonic dragnet, the complicity of indigenous music industry in the Bhangra boom complicates Bhangra commerce beyond local global disbalance. The local music industry's exploitation of the popularisation of Bhangra as World Music primarily accounts for Bhangra's return and marketing within India. Cashing in on Bhangra's success overseas, the Indian music industry works overtime to devise an altogether different strategy in Bhangra's marketing within the nation.

The violence perpetrated by World Music by uprooting music from its traditional contexts is replicated in Indian popular music. While World Music dresses up Bhangra in an exotic outfit to sate Western desires for others, Indian popular culture casts Bhangra in a popular musical costume for urban middle class entertainment. Though the artist might put his foot down in certain matters, especially when he can afford to, he is forced to play the rules of the popular cultural game the moment he agrees to participate in it. The distinction that needs to be made is between those who do it with a smile and those who frown. The most popular Bhangra artists like Gurdas Mann, Daler Mehndi or Malkit Singh possess an inherent star presence and appear to immerse themselves wholeheartedly in the market economy of popular culture.

² As music of the working classes, those in power are ridiculed in Bhangra *bolis*.



Daler Mehndi: Crossing regional boundaries with Bhangra-pop
 Image sourced from <http://www.no-nothingrock.com/articles/daler/>

The difference is between those who give themselves completely to commercial interest and those who disavow commercial interest. The market is quick to create an authenticity cult centred on their disavowal of commercial interest. Whatever be the intention, the Bhangra artist whose natural spontaneity and agility is converted into a selling proposition, is reified along with his music, dance and the female chorus surrounding him; in the star-studded Bhangra industry, musical genre, content, lyrics, video and the artist's image are determined by market requirements. Bhangra exemplifies the standardization associated with mass cultural products. Not only are only those artists promoted whose music fits in with the market demand but also the content of the music is dictated by what appeals to a primarily youth market. When the market demands hybrids, artists must deliver hybrids; when it switches over to pure Bhangra, they must follow suit. In the process, the artists' freedom is restricted to remaining in or stepping out of the system of sonic commerce. Though senior Bhangra artists like Gurdas Mann can today afford not to compromise on lyrics or themes, new entrants invariably repeat the saleable market formulae. If a particular formula clicks in the market, all are enjoined to produce variations on the same theme. So if the listener is bombarded with formulaic refrain of *sohniye* one season, the next season the Bhangrascape is deluged with *put jattan da* with all major and minor artists contributing their bit. Artistic freedom and creativity must be sacrificed at the altar of saleability largely predicated on standardization. Individual difference and innovativeness may be exercised only within the parameters established by standard Bhangra industry. Conversely, differences between individual artists are exploited as a brand manufacturing strategy.

Through its assent to the economics of the commodity markets, the Bhangra artists give their tacit consent to their own commodification. The production of Bhangra and Bhangra artists proceeds by the rules of the marketing of other commodities. Not only is Bhangra manufactured, distributed and consumed in accordance with the conventions of the commodity market, but it is also converted into a brand. The logic that is seen at work in the making and marketing of other brands works to make Bhangra an unprecedented marketing success.

Contemporary Indian musical consciousness is defined in Adornoesque terms displaying a split between the high and the folk, the aesthetic and ascetic, entertainment and

pleasure. When high and folk art begin to be defined by 'displeasure in pleasure', popular culture acquires pure entertainment value even as the enjoyment it promises is simultaneously denied. Adopting a typical Frankfurt school line, cultural critics dismiss popular cultural products while lamenting the decline in musical tastes, the standardization of cultural products, the personality cult, the regressive character of listening, and the passivity of the masses. The advent of popular culture in India is seen as destabilizing the harmonious relationship between the high and the low in which the low served as a sort of introduction and preparation for the high. Indian folk cultures, assigned a supplementary role in the Great Little tradition independency, break free of the hierarchy through their removal into the popular sphere. A simple reversal of popular and high, which has become standard post-modern practice, cannot elucidate Bhangra's decentring of the Indian cultural universe.

Neither the denunciation of mass culture nor the celebration of popular culture can adequately account for Bhangra's participation in contemporary culture. Bhangra's assent to market dynamics cannot be isolated from its involvement in other discourses. If Bhangra's hybridisation compromises with tradition, it also enables its marketing, and hence its revival and globalisation. If it objectifies and eroticises the female and Punjabi body and music, it also enters the global popular cultural sphere appropriating it to its own needs. If Bhangra has appropriated Punjabi music, dance, ritual and body for popular consumption, it also encloses it in a private space from which the outsider is shut out.

The obscenity charge holds, if at all, with reference to the music video which introduces a dichotomy between Bhangra's lyric and visual content. Most objections are levelled at the visual rather than verbal imagery. Traditional Bhangra costume drapes the Punjabi woman from head to foot, underplaying the sensual dance movements even in ritual enclosures. At first sight, the semi-clad female body appears like a visual shock, a blasphemy against Bhangra's sacred iconography. Not only is the female body held up for inspection the Bhangra video, but the camera appears to linger lasciviously on certain body parts. Recent Bhangra albums, such as Bally Sagoo's remix of Javed Bashir's *Nahi Tera Ja Aur Disdah*, are particularly explicit in the celebration of female sexuality through autoerotic gestures and so on. But the music video's visual vocabulary derives from the generic requirement of American popular culture into which Bhangra has been inserted. American popular cultural visual idiom intersects with Bollywood musical grammar in the Bhangra music video. Bhangra music videos, like Hindi film music sequences, present visual counterparts to the lyrics. The sexual and romantic suggestiveness of the lyrics and music becomes visually explicit in the video. If Hindi film dance and song sequences are sublimated fantasies of hidden male desires, the Bhangra music video also makes explicit male fantasies couched in the lyrics. The folk artist appears to be the one most ill at ease amongst uninhibited westernised female dancers.

My intention is not to exculpate the Bhangra video from the obscenity charge but to elucidate its eroticisation with reference to its decontextualisation and deterritorialisation. The relocation of Bhangra from the sacred ritual space to the profane American popular cultural spaces implicates it in the rules of a different public sphere. Vulgarity, always

culture specific, redefined as eroticisation, might have to be justified as a generic requirement. Bhangra videos are no less or more vulgar than the regular Euro-American popular cultural fare transmitted to the world. But whether they have any business in that sphere is another question. Once Bhangra consents to enter this sphere, it is forced to subscribe to the rules of the game it has opted to play, irrespective of how unfair or humiliating the rules might be. We return once again to the question we began with, the *modus operandi* of mass cultural products. Culture's commodification is implicit in its transformation into a commodity for sale. Having entered the field of commerce, it no longer has the jurisdiction to arbitrate on the ethics of marketing products. If Bhangra becomes embroiled in the politics of marketing, one doesn't need to ask how it is commoditised but why it is commoditised.

My contention is the moment Bhangra descends to the profane popular cultural space, it tacitly consents to be subjected to the same rules and regulations governing other popular cultural items, including to its own commodification. Having consented to its desacralisation, it appears to have forfeited the right to interrogate details of the desacralising process. Once again, without justifying its eroticisation and commodification, one would like to ask if Bhangra visuals are any different from other cultural items, in the same category. In my opinion, as Bhangra's desacralisation cannot be separated, one being the effect of the other, the problem seems to be one of being in the wrong place or category. Bhangra is caught in the contradictory requirements of the fields it shuttles between. Predicated on the condition of the disavowal of the commercial as a folk ritual, its transmutation into dance music inserts it in the sphere of commerce.

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture. Ed. J.M. Bernstein. London: Routledge. 1991
- Attali, Jacques. Noise: The Political Economy of Music. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 1985.
- Brennan, Timothy. "World Music Does not Exist." Discourse (Special Issue on *Imperial Disclosures*) Winter 2001: 144-162.
- Bohlan, Phillip. World Music: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford University Press. 2002.
- Erlmann, Veit. "The Politics and Aesthetics of Transnational Musics." The World of Music 35.2 (1993): 3-15.
- Hutnyk, John. Critique of Exotica: Music, Politics and the Culture Industry. London: Pluto Press. 2000.
- Klein, Naomi. No Logo. London: Harper Collins. 2000
- Sharma, Ashwani. "Sounds Oriental: The (Im)possibility of Theorizing Asian Musical Cultures." Dis-orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music. Eds. Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma. London: Zed Books, 1996.

Published online on the website www.redearthindia.com & made available for free access by Red Earth, New Delhi, 2005.

© Anjali Gera Roy, 2005. All rights reserved.

Copyright for images used belongs to their respective copyright owners.

Anjali is Professor of English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur (India). She has specialised in post-colonial studies and published several articles in the area. She has also authored a book on the oral-written interface in Nigerian fiction and edited special issues of reputed journals on *New Directions in African Writing and Postcolonial Translation*. Her current interests are Bhangra, Partition, and diasporic fiction and film.

To share your views with the author, write to her at agera_99@yahoo.com

Copyright Notice: No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above mentioned publisher of this publication.

Views expressed in this article are those of the author, and not necessarily those of Red Earth.

Red Earth
A 39/3, SFS, Saket,
New Delhi 110017, India
Phone: 91-11-51764054
www.redearthindia.com
contact@redearthindia.com