

Performing Outside One's Comfort Zone: India@oz

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What are the multiple ways in which young South Asiansⁱ in Australia participate in different forms of negotiation, between memory and forgetting, Indianness and Australianness, notions of tradition and cultural change, love, sex and romance, family and community and silence and speaking? How important is history and tradition in young people's lives? How might we understand the transforming desires and wants of young South Asians in Australia? In this article, I use Ashis Nandy's 'time travel' in Cochinⁱⁱ to attempt some insights into the preoccupations of these young people and their lived realities, the imaginative projections of their 'silent and elusive pasts'ⁱⁱⁱ and its traces in the present.

The sites of being for young South Asians in Sydney are the public spaces of the urban landscape where they perform and practice forms of social, economic and political action in the context of some norm of 'Indian' behaviour. These intimate experiences contain many of the most compelling and memorable moments of social life and their affect generates much of the immediate meaning and connection with broader socialities. These young people do not construct themselves in either/or categories, a nativist longing for a homeland past, OR in a global representational economy of the new capitalist culture of modernity. They represent, in fact, a kind of 'alternative cosmopolitanism', a transcultural identity without a single point of reference^{iv}.

The spectre that consistently haunts their communities is the single young woman or man as anomaly, as threat or object of uneasy reflections about the nature of cultural boundaries in an environment where new cultural spaces are constantly framed by counterpolitics and interventions, narratives and everyday lives. The process of migration influences the reinterpretation of the past and the translation of the present so that the nature of subjectivity is contingent and contested. It does not float aimlessly in a postmodern moment; rather it is grounded in a thousand plateaus, felt and experienced through the body, historical landscapes, domestic spaces, performance, the impact of ideals and the weight of history^v.

In 2003, I was involved in a performance project called India@oz.sangam involving many young people of South Asian descent which performed to sellout houses in Sydney. This production displayed "a tremendous sense of pride, fun and celebration, embodied as it was in the spectacle and melodrama of Bollywood, that miracle of the hybrid arts, and focused on being young and Indian-Australian. ... The younger women gather in a song of defiance, one of their number on sax, the bodies say pop, the gesturing hands say traditional Indian dance"^{vi}. Besides, dance, rap, installations and story-telling, the project included little dramas - parents struggling to understand sons who only speak hip hop; a "This is Your Wife" parody, "putting the 'arranged' back into the arranged marriage"; a father with 2 PhDs but no job; the trials of a newly married couple. A reviewer wrote:

'The Indian lads did their rhymes in Aussie accents, the dancing mixed classical Indian with contemporary breaking, and some of the best text pieces dealt with generational differences. One of the lessons of this show was the way cultural intermingling can result in new forms and genres that are unexpected and are often more than the sum of their component influences.'^{vii}

Most of the people who participated in the project identified as 'Indian' but via, variously, Fiji, Dubai, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and had different religious backgrounds. The composite identities articulated through this process of performance were related as much through their differences as through their similarities. There was no 'search for purity'; rather a self-confident borrowing from a variety of cultures with few inhibitions^{viii}. For these young South Asians, meditating on "Indian-ness" comprised continuing shifting and protean struggles "hooking and unhooking particular elements"^{ix}. This project convinced me that the history of movements and dislocations requires some radical re-enchantment.

Brown noise

Today brown equals black equals white equals fact

*That its time for the colour blind, won't you think about that?
In this space we fill this place with noise
Brown noise, issues you cant avoid^x*

South Asians are now in the top ten categories of immigrants in Australia. In Sydney, little subcontinental patches display numerous clones of the first North Indian Diner, as well as sari, spice and video shops plastered with film posters or notices of events. Less visible in the media or academic literature are the second generation, many of whom are studying or working in 'high-status' sectors such as law, medicine, technology, finance, health and education. This second-generation youth has created a new popular club culture, based on dance parties and music mixes, which is part of both Sydney and of transnational South Asian public culture. Like the term 'desi' in the USA, they use 'curry' as one of the terms to identify collectively young people of sub-continental descent who hotly contest the transnational imaginings of 'India' within local contexts of nationalism and race, class and gender hierarchies.

These new spaces and cultural forms on the margins of society contest both local and traditional notions of identity at the same time as engaging with the complex challenge of reconciling the older generations' cultural narratives with current experiences and realities. Thus, while young South Asians negotiate between several worlds and world-views to create a space of autonomy for themselves, they are strongly influenced by the so-called 'Asian values' of filial piety, and respect for age and authority. Their parents' generation, however, is haunted by the spectre of the loss of 'culture' and 'tradition' through the process of migration. For them, this is manifested in the social lives, behaviour and appearance of their children, their clothing, dialect and musical tastes. Paradoxically, for young people, the selective adoption and re-interpretation of bits of sound from Bollywood, Indian music, hip-hop and rap create markers of ethnicity and material status that mediate South Asian musical and dance tradition through the rituals of Western popular culture, thus dealing with the demands of both their parents and the society to perform some 'authentic' ethnic identity^{xi}. In a world in which representation is one of the most contested resources, these hybridized and performative genres mingle, contest and create both the polyphonic qualities of current and local South Asian identities/cultures as well as the continuity of ancestral traditions.

Initially, nightclubs in Sydney, catering specially for South Asian clientele were located in suburbs with large concentrations of South Asians such as Liverpool. By 2005, this music/dance style had become mainstreamed with Bar Broadway, Martin Place Bar and City Hotel in central Sydney targeting the South Asian diaspora with Hindi music, *bhangra* or Bollywood nights at least once a month. In August of 2002, Bar Broadway celebrated ten years of Masala Mix on a local radio station by holding a hugely successful 'Bend it like Bhangra' evening ("Bent bhangra. Bollywood breaks. Raag fusion"). Websites like Hot Ashes keep punters informed of events such as visits by A. R. Rahman, the Bollywood music supremo, as well as DJs from the UK or USA.

The phenomenon of 'curry' parties fit in with the larger structure of clubbing in Sydney. Though not ethnically or racially segregated, the majority of attendees are South Asian and a deejay (mostly of subcontinental origin) spinning the right music is essential. The parties are publicized via a web of information, word of mouth, internet mailing lists, websites such as Hot Ashes and flyers distributed at events, shops and clubs. There is a distinctively hybrid style (labeled 'Indo-chic') to these parties, such as wearing Indian style nose-rings, henna or bindis with western clothing and dancing Bhangra moves to club remixes, which demonstrates the ways in which consumption is used to negotiate ideas of ethnic authenticity, cultural ownership, and race.

The invitation came in an email:

"Subject: who stole my chappati?"

hey guess what, this wk the closing party of Carnivale is happening down at the Seymour Center on Saturday night ... i don't have many ppls emails addresses so so so i need u to help me out and pass this on...

the party is called Bollywood Nights Masti... the fusion dancers are gonna be performing... and yeah, it'd be waycool if everyone was there ... actually Miguel and Akaash (DJs) ... are hoping everyone can dress up a bit and make lots of noise and also give out a few flyers here and there...'

As we enter the party venue, we are given a bindi each to stick wherever. The space upstairs is big but soon seems too small for the numbers of people who throng the floor. DJs Akaash and Earthbrownkid spin on a raised stage area as the insistent beat of bhangra, fused with somewhat bland western pop tracks, gives way to the infectious Saba Saba from the film Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gam. They are joined by another DJ, good looking, dressed in black trousers and achkan who is clearly popular since he is greeted with a big cheer. He laughs and asks "who are the desis and who are the goras?" In fact, tonight, though most faces are various shades of South Asian there is a plentiful sprinkling of some goras^{xii} as well as some South East and East Asians.

On some large screens on the walls are the ubiquitous visuals, a m lange/medley of Bollywood movies – Amitabh Bachhan keeps popping up.

Amongst the more languorously moving bodies is a group of young men, doing an extremely athletic version of bhangra moves. They perform for each other; in fact, there are few mixed couples dancing – it is mostly girls with girls and boys with boys.

Another cheer announces the Mango Dancers. Three girls dressed in cargo pants, sari blouses, bindi and tikli (head tassels). One with a perfect figure, one a little chubby and one quite plump, almost as if the gradation were done on purpose. According to the DJ, they are trained in street funk, Indian belly dancing, classical Indian dance and Latin dance (!). Their fluid movements evoking various genres of dance, Indian and other, challenge what has been till now an exclusively male, Punjabi performance.

Now the party is really moving. It is 1 am, way past my bedtime.

In Australia, this remix music has become a recognized part of broader popular culture. At the same time the mainstreaming of Indo-chic is a contested issue because of the way in which consumption is used to negotiate ideas of ethnic authenticity, cultural ownership and race, a kind of new Orientalization of India. For example, my daughter refuses to wear any Indo-chic because “people will think I’m wearing it because I’m Indian.”

‘Funny How You Don’t See Curries Trying To Act Like Aborigines’

*“first Ahilan, then the mind invasion
ask me now its Afrocentric Asian
spent time confused, many cultures refused,
seen friends abused, my mentality bruised,
Curry brothers with shaved heads pretendin’ they’re black
smoke a fag see ya stare back and attack
Seen friends go hardcore and wear big chains
am I Aussie or Curry? Flatline, am I sane?
Assumptions made when they visaged my dreads,
acid-head? through real friends truth spreads”^{xiii}*

This rap lyric expresses some of the contradictions and paradoxes in the lives of most young South Asians in Australia. As Indo-chic and remix music reshapes the notion of cool, young SA women live daily in an ambiguous liminal space, often maintaining double personalities, one for Indian parents and one for public spaces away from parents’ scrutiny. For example, parents might approve of Indian dance parties as long as their daughters didn’t go with boyfriends.

*Jothi: I think they like us to go because it keeps us hanging out with Indians; I mean they know that stuff goes on, drinking and stupid things but they think, this probably happens everywhere so better it is at Indian parties.”
Priya: It’s like schizophrenia; we literally switch. Jothi and I wear our party clothes underneath the daggy stuff and change in the car, into halters, midriff showing things, mini skirts and so on.”*

Young South Asians also experience a dichotomy between ‘real’ Indian culture and one that ‘panders to the west’ based on definitions filtered through the socialization of immigrant parents. Along with the hybrid popular culture of the diaspora exists a parallel transnational circuit of ‘authentic’ Indian cultural productions from the sub-continent which serve to reify the image of India in the west as a mythical land of spirituality, ‘good values’ and unchanging traditions.

yeah we ain’t curry anymore... we ain’t aussie, or white aussie anyway, either... we like some dodgy curry where amma grabbed the wrong spices... cept, even though it’s been in the fridge for like 4 months, it actually tastes better each day... but noone knows what to call it... so we scrap our traditional names, cut em up and jumble em into some new set of letters that ppl haven’t seen b4 and can’t stereotype...”^{xiv}

Many of the hip young men in the group that I interviewed recognise that the ‘authentic’ group from which they derive their style – young black Afro-American males – is absent from their physical space. In the [India@oz](#) project, two young men performed a piece about being labelled black (“all my life I’ve been running from one image to the next...I need to get rid of the mask, the colour.”). The irony of their plight is powerfully stated in their admiration for black American heroes—Martin Luther King, Malcolm X—since there are no obvious South Asian role models on the Australian scene. The ambiguity of adopting Black hip-hop or rap style in an ethnically exclusive space defers the question of colour – black, brown and white - especially because most of these young Indians want to move into the professional college-educated successful futures. They do not see the curry party culture as resistance to class or race stratification; rather they expect to succeed within the dominant system.

Earthbrownkid, a medical student who also moonlights as a deejay in the Masala Mix and Bar Broadway’s Bollywood nights, puts it this way:

The problem is that we don't know how to act brown. The way the media is you would think the world is black or white. Colour tv is a lie. White surfy, skatie, grungehead, home'n'away character is cool. Black, athletic, streetsmart cat is cool. All the colours in between get played off as geek, weak or scum. The only alternative is do-it-yourself stuff like Pizza. At least wogs have an identity on the screen. Curries ain't got shit. I suppose u can get ZeeTV cable or watch the Kumars, but even that is imported, it isn't Australian... Plus living in Australia, you get censored from all the real issues for black people, funny how you don't see curries trying to act like Aborigines. You just get the glamour and glitz, bling bling, get money, shoot em up footage... or you could try and be white I suppose. Just that every day the truth would be staring you in the face. And having to explain to puzzled faces that you were born in this country doesn't exactly help either.^{xv}

Thus this ethnic youth subculture accommodates itself to the dominant racial and class framework that both contains and subverts the ambiguities of second-generation experience. Their performance of both “Indian-ness” and “Australian-ness” in lived experience and daily practice is not the manifestation of the free play of a hybrid identity but rather a creative response to the demand for coherence and stability within specific racial and cultural contexts; a means to negotiate everyday predicaments. Their kind of history is experienced in the ‘fantasised past’, configured as an immediate felt reality^{xvi}. Differences are not ‘ironed out’; just like the inhabitants of Cochin, these young people speak different languages at home with their families, another at work, and still another for creative self-expression through music, theatre and dance^{xvii}. This deferral of a bounded identity by young South Asians may indicate an informed choice, not between current home and ancestral land but of both spaces, India and Australia, as imaginatively real and desirable.^{xviii}

Conclusion

Everyday lifeworlds contain potentialities and possibilities for intercultural negotiations and engagements that are often missing from more sophisticated and/or institutionalised spheres. Discourses of multi-culturalism and Australian values as articulated by government institutions elide diverse forms of everyday co-existence and acceptance of difference. The young South Asians with whom I worked functioned across different arenas, appropriating the accoutrements of different identities, South Asian, Indian, Australian, as they needed them, playing with the irony of hybrid terms such as ‘curry’, ‘fob’ or ‘abcd’ at the same time as subtly interrogating the term ‘Australian’.

Katy: People keep asking me, ‘Where are you from?’ but they never ask ‘Where are you going?’

Chris: When they ask me ‘what’s your nash?’ (nationality), I just say ‘All of the above’.

Ashis Nandy, in his study of Cochin, points out that multiculturalism need not be merely a social and political arrangement, a principle of citizenship tolerating or celebrating disparate lifestyles. Rather the term may imply a culturally embedded identity in which the other becomes an inalienable part of the self like the elusive murmurings of translucent and barely visible spectres^{xix}. I have tried not to romanticize either diasporic or local cultures as the true sites for some kind of radical re-enchantment but rather to argue, with Amitabh Kumar, that the possibilities of diasporic culture have to do with its potential to resist national wills and narrowly nationalist identities, to struggle to escape the dictates of local stringencies and celebrate instead the contingent character of the present^{xx}. The white patrons of the various Indian diners may not know how to tell a Bangladeshi from an Indian but the Bangladeshi Muslim in the local cafe tells me in Bengali that he is careful to cook his lamb and chicken separately from his beef so as to accommodate Hindus and warns me when the *biriyani* contains beef. His politics of accommodation in a refigured context acknowledges the connections that bind us together in our adopted country.

Talpade Mohanty has cautioned that the very process of constructing a narrative for oneself imposes a coherence that is never entirely there. But that perhaps, she adds, is the lesson for migrants; home, community and identity all fall somewhere between the histories and experiences we inherit and the political choices we make through alliances, solidarities and friendships^{xxi}.

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Hot Ashes, www.hotashes.com.au, accessed Jan 23rd 2007

¹ <http://www.realttimearts.net/>, accessed Dec 15th, 2004

ⁱ By 'South Asian', I mean people who identify as being from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, whether they migrated from the South Asian region proper or from other countries such as Fiji, Mauritius, Malaysia, Singapore, Africa or the Middle East. Sometimes I use 'Indian' as an unsatisfactory adjective where 'South Asian' sounds too awkward.

ⁱⁱ Ashis Nandy, 'Time Travel to a Possible Self: Searching for the Alternative Cosmopolitanism of Cochín', *Time Warps: Silent and Elusive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*, Hurst and Company, London, 2002

ⁱⁱⁱ Ashis Nandy, *Time Warps: Silent and Elusive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*, Hurst and Company, London, 2002, p. 209.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 157.

^v I am indebted to Mandy Thomas' discussion of an earlier iteration of this article for many of these ideas.

^{vi} <http://www.realttimearts.net/>, accessed Dec 15th, 2004

^{vii} Stephen Dunne, 'Hip-hopping rip-rapping we can all enjoy', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, October 6 2003

^{viii} Ashis Nandy, *Time Warps: Silent and Elusive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*, Hurst and Company, London, 2002, p. 160.

^{ix} James Clifford, 'Indigenous Articulations', *The Contemporary Pacific*, p. 477, Fall 2001

^x Curry Puffs, India@oz.sangam.

^{xi} See, for instance, Sunaina Maira's *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2002.

^{xii} A Hindi word meaning white, often used to connote Europeans, white people and so on.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} Hot Ashes, www.hotashes.com.au, accessed Jan 23rd 2005

^{xv} *Ibid.*

^{xvi} Ashis Nandy, *Time Warps: Silent and Elusive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*, Hurst and Company, London, 2002, p. 162.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, p. 202.

^{xviii} Yao Souchou, personal letter 2004

^{xix} Ashis Nandy, *Time Warps: Silent and Elusive Pasts in Indian Politics and Religion*, Hurst and Company, London, 2002, p. 209.

^{xx} Amitabh Kumar, *Passport Photos*, 229

^{xxi} *Ibid.*, epigraph