

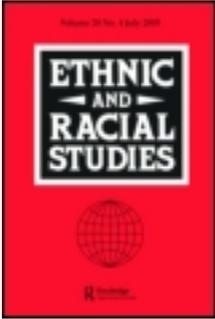
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Longings and belongings: Indian American youth identity, folk dance competitions, and the construction of ‘tradition’

Elizabeth Chacko and Rajiv Menon

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Abstract

This article examines the development of the ‘cultural competition’ as a site for the production of multiple identities by Indian American youths on American college campuses. Through the examination of two categories of folk dance competitions (bhangra and raas-garba) at a private university in Washington, DC, we argue that these competitions appear to resist hybridity and produce rhetoric that marginalizes diasporic culture in favour of the ‘pure’ and ‘authentic’ culture of the homeland. However, the goal of expressing uncontaminated ‘authentic’ culture is not realized as diasporic identities and cultures consistently interrupt and undermine homogenizing narratives of ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity’. We also demonstrate that these folk dance groups often reinforce an ethno-regional distinctiveness rather than a hybrid or pan-Indian identity.

Keywords: Ethnic identity; South Asian immigrants; second generation; cultural hybridity and essentialism; performance; youth.

Introduction

Identity formation among second-generation immigrant youth usually reflects their experiences related to otherness, the desire to embrace their heritage, and the inherent hybridity of their existence (Levitt and Waters 2002; Kasinitz et al. 2009). Cultural practices in multiple spaces, including clubs, homes, public spaces, and college campuses, are fundamental to the creation of uniquely diasporic concepts of cultural and ethnic identity for this group (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Lee and Zhou 2004; Zhou and Xiong 2005; Brettell and Nibbs 2009).

For second-generation youths, the time spent during college is a critical period for identity formation that is independent of familial social networks (Maira 2002; Brettell and Nibbs 2009). On college campuses, these cultural practices can include student activism (Wei 2004), religious practices (Prashad 2000), club culture (Maira 2002), and most importantly for this study, cultural performances.

Musical and dance performances, often performed in the public spaces of a college campus or community centre, have become a notable marker of cultural identity for second-generation immigrants of South Asian descent in the United States (Maira 2002; Melomo 2005; Purkayastha 2005; Isler 2008; Lal 2008; Shankar 2008; Shresthova 2008; Brettell and Nibbs 2009). For many diasporic Indians who simultaneously face detachment from the homeland and longing for the idea of a lost cultural heritage, these performances are coded with numerous interpretations of diasporic existence. Among second-generation diasporic Indians living in the multicultural United States, 'cultural' performance can become a means of responding to anxieties over cultural identity by constructing an artificial notion of 'authenticity'.

In this article, we will examine the recent development of the 'cultural competition' as a literal and figurative stage for the performance of ethnic identity. By focusing on bhangra and raas-garba, folk dance forms and major categories of South Asian dance competitions, we will demonstrate how South Asian American performance groups balance the tensions between the rhetoric of cultural authenticity and the inherently hybrid aesthetics of these performances. For our paper, we study two major national competitions ('Raas Chaos', 2008 and 2009, and 'Bhangra Blowout', 2009 and 2010), organized and hosted by the South Asian Society of a private university (identified here as 'Mount Vernon University' or MVU, a pseudonym) in the Washington, DC area. In both competitions dance teams consists of fourteen to sixteen members and most are evenly split between men and women, though there are also single-sex bhangra and raas-garba teams. Bhangra and raas-garba teams are largely Punjabi and Gujarati respectively, although they include participants with heritage from various Indian states. On occasion teams have non-Indian participants. Through analyses based on participant observation during practices and subsequent re-visitation of dance performances through video recordings, focus group discussions and unstructured interviews with Indian American participants in dance competitions, we demonstrate that performance has developed into an accepted means of conveying 'authentic' cultural identity. We also argue that these competitions redefine the 'homeland' in regional and local terms, bypassing diasporic and national identity. We suggest that the success of these attempts to construct ideas of 'tradition' and

'authentic' culture in dance competitions is incomplete, as performers' multiple levels of cultural affiliation routinely disrupt the rhetorical narrative of a 'pure' identity of the 'homeland'.

Diaspora, Indian Americans, and second-generation identity

Theorizations of diaspora have been a valuable framework for examining cultural exchanges and transformations following the migration and displacement of populations. The concept of diaspora has had a role in destabilizing the concept of the 'nation', as such migrations construct new forms of exchange that force a reconsideration of national and cultural 'belonging' (Hall 1990; Clifford 1994; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2005). Studies on diaspora emphasize that immigrant populations are not homogeneous, though they are often bound by common experiences that lead to migration (Portes and Bach 1985; Appadurai 2003; Lowe 2003). Furthermore, these studies note that for individuals in a diaspora, the site of ethnic or cultural origin becomes an important marker of identity, though these concepts are often re-imagined in general and simplified terms (Bhabha 1996; Prashad 2000; Mazumdar 2003; Radhakrishnan 2003). As a result, various forms of popular cultural production become key in constructing new conceptualizations of cultural identity and the 'homeland', a notion that is heavily indebted to examinations of production and consumption in the field of cultural studies (Barker 2008). Diaspora is consequently an important theoretical concept when discussing the formation of cultural identity among second-generation immigrants.

The theoretical concept of hybridity has emerged concurrently with the notion of diaspora to explain cultural identity. Hybridity emphasizes the exchanges between various cultural identities, though most prominent theorizations of this process posit that all culture is inherently hybrid (Young 1995; Bhabha 1996; Prashad 2001; Bhabha 2004). This understanding of multiple cultural influences is particularly important in the study of diasporic populations, since such groups are often characterized as 'Janus-faced', as they simultaneously look towards their site of settlement and the homeland (Brazier and Mannur 2003). However, hybridity is not simply the fusion of two binarized categories of identity; hybridity instead destabilizes the fixity of these categories (Bhabha 1996, 2004; Young 1995).

Unlike other Indian diasporas worldwide, the Indian diaspora in the United States has developed recently. While Indians had entered the United States in small numbers during the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries, the majority of Indian immigrants entered the country after immigration reforms in 1965. Prominent among early

and later Indian immigrant groups to the United States were people of Punjabi and Gujarati origin (Kibria 2005; Lal 2008). Reflecting the assertion that diasporas, though often categorized monolithically, are not homogeneous, the category of 'Indian American' is itself extremely heterogeneous, as Indian immigrants represent numerous linguistic, regional, and religious origins.

Studies have found that, as with most diasporas, separation from the homeland and anxieties over assimilation have led to 'long-distance nationalism' (Anderson 1998), often through emotional and social linkages to the homeland that prioritize 'authentic' cultural identity among members of the Indian diaspora (Prashad 2000; Mazumdar 2003; Radhakrishnan 2003; Kurien 2007; Lal 2008). For Indian Americans who struggle with ethnic difference and a sense of loss from the homeland, the constructions of notions of 'authenticity' help mediate these difficulties. However, issues of 'authentic' culture cannot exist without perceptions that 'traditional' cultural is somehow threatened. Notions of authenticity are not inherently progressive, and are greatly influenced by American multiculturalism, which emphasizes neo-orientalist notions of 'tradition' and the idea that cultural difference should be expressed through visible, consumable displays (Prashad 2000).

Furthermore, when such ideas are mobilized in the context of diasporic detachment, there is often no point of reference to outline that these ideas of authenticity are not inherent, but actively constructed. Moreover, the first generation, having lived in India, is often granted an authority over 'tradition', even though this group's discussions of authenticity assume a cultural fixity that does not exist. Frequently, constructions of 'tradition' actually refer to uniquely diasporic forms of cultural production, demonstrating that 'authentic' cultural identity is often the projection of diasporic identity upon the homeland (Lal 2008).

In contrast to recent ethnographies of Indian American high school students (Shankar 2008; Maira 2009), studies of Indian American college students demonstrate how identities develop independent of family life (Maira 2002; Purkayastha 2005; Isler 2008; Lal 2008). Both sets of studies refer to the importance of cultural organizations and cultural performances in constructing 'authentic' identity among second-generation college students. However, there has yet to be a major exploration of the development of cultural competitions on college campuses. This study aims to fill that gap and examine how Indian American participants in these competitions utilize cultural performances as a marker of cultural 'authenticity'.

Proving oneself through performance: song and dance as a cultural litmus test

For many Indian American college students, university life provides an opportunity to explore ethnic identity in an independent manner that was not afforded to them in high school. Maira (2002) suggests that second-generation Indian American youth, though stigmatized by ethnic difference in high school, often ‘come out’ as Indian in college and explore their sense of identity, assisted by the presence of ethnic organizations and university resources to support them. Though their experiences were not homogeneous and were defined by various personal factors, focus group discussants in our study found that student organizations and the community that they fostered were fundamental in a shift of cultural identity that occurred upon entering college. Many participants stated that performance was a means of reconnecting with their ‘roots’. Given that these organizations, from which Indian American college students derive a sense of ethnic identity, largely revolve around cultural acts, it is not surprising that performance becomes prioritized as a means of expressing Indian identity among this group.

Several discussions of performance in the Indian diaspora have focused on those that occur within the context of the ‘culture show’ (Maira 2002; Melomo 2005; Lal 2008; Shankar 2008; Shresthova 2008). The culture show in the context of university life is a student-organized event that features a series of acts ranging from vocal performances to skits and fashion shows, though dances are typically its prime focus. Most college students of Asian-Indian origin learn the dance steps to ‘traditional’ dances such as bhangra and raas from older students, although many young Asian-Indians have a basic knowledge of raas-garba, given its social function at Indian celebrations. With the exception of occasional guest acts, students perform all of the acts for an audience that can range from predominantly Indian to predominantly non-South Asian, depending on the demographics of the university and the inclusiveness of the host organization. The culture show provides theatrical displays of culture and grants a space for the performative components of symbolic ethnicity among the second generation, notions that are equally applicable to the cultural competition (Maira 2002). Nostalgia for lost Indian ‘culture’ and the idealization of that culture are major components of many cultural competitions.

Culture shows are a major focus of MVU’s Indian Student Association (a student organization that is separate from the South Asian Society and focuses on smaller events), which hosts a Diwali (Hindu festival of lights) show during the fall semester and a Holi (Hindu festival of springtime) show during the spring semester. During

the 2009 Diwali show, all but one act was a dance performance, and, interestingly, this exception was a skit performed by graduate students who had recently relocated to the United States. At the time of our research, there did not appear to be extensive socialization among first- and second-generation Indian students at the university. Transnational influences appear to be limited to the importation of music (CDs, DVDs, etc.) and not through collaboration with recent immigrants or performers and choreographers living in India. Musical and dance performance was taken as a representation of Indian cultural identity by every group of performers except the group made up of individuals who were born and raised in India. For the participants in our focus group, however, musical and dance performance was considered a clear marker of cultural identity. Performing in a biannual culture show was inadequate, and regular rehearsal and attending cultural competitions were the favoured means of staying connected to their sense of regional or pan-Indian identity.

Bhangra and raas-garba: folk dances and diaspora

While Bollywood music and dancing is often the first performance type associated with the Indian diaspora in the United States, bhangra and raas-garba are two regionally defined folk dance forms that demonstrate the emergence of sub-national Indian cultural forms among Indian Americans. However, both of these dance forms have particularly complex histories that complicate the assumption that they are solely reflective of regional cultures.

Bhangra refers to a type of Punjabi folk dance originally performed by men as a celebration of the harvest (Gopinath 1995) and is usually associated with the Sikh religion. In its folk form, bhangra valorizes rural Punjabi culture and masculinity, but this is not always reflected by the performances. The rhetoric of regional exceptionalism found in bhangra has been replicated and enhanced in diasporic forms of Sikh and Punjabi nationalism (Bhatt and Mukta 2000; Kalra 2000). Bhangra music uses Indian drums and stringed instruments, while the lyrics traditionally celebrate the beauty of Punjab, village life, and women (Maira 2002, p. 212). However, while such notions of 'tradition' continue to exist, bhangra has undergone numerous cultural transformations that shape how the folk form appears in the United States today.

Many identify Punjab as the centre of the 1947 Partition of India, and consequential migrations and displacements from the state, particularly to Britain, have been essential to the formation of bhangra's modern form (Gopinath 1995; Gera Roy 2001; Dudrah 2002; Gopinath 2005; Gera Roy 2009). Punjabi immigrants in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s regularly reproduced bhangra music in the

contexts of cultural celebrations, weddings, and religious spaces (Gopinath 1995; Dudrah 2002). As new generations of the Punjabi diaspora in Britain emerged, bhangra music began to blend with numerous other musical forms, such as rap, reggae, and house. These new blends of British bhangra music created unique forms of the folk music and performance that were rooted within the experiences and polycultural exchanges of specifically diasporic practices. The predominantly working-class, west London neighbourhood of Southall (which has a large concentration of Indian and Punjabi immigrants), for example, has emerged as a dominant site for the production of diasporic forms of bhangra music and performance (Gopinath 1995; Gera Roy 2001; Dudrah 2002; Melomo 2005; Gera Roy 2009).

As the performance form evolved and blended with other polycultural forms of music and dance, the lyrical concerns of *vilayeti* (foreign, in this context British) bhangra developed away from explicit celebrations of the rural landscape and village life to meditations upon the diasporic experience. Over time the music became rooted within diasporic spaces like Southall, with *vilayeti* bhangra taking interest in ‘questions of home, exile, and origin’ (Gopinath 2005, p. 34). As the folk form took on new syncretic and transdiasporic elements, the lyrics became decreasingly concerned with Punjab as a site of veneration and loss and increasingly representative of pan-Asian and even Afro-Asian experiences, reflecting solidarity among working-class immigrant groups (Gopinath 1995; Kalra 2000; Gera Roy 2001; Dudrah 2002; Gopinath 2005; Gera Roy 2009).

The Punjabi diaspora has become increasingly diffuse, particularly in the United States and Canada, with multiple sites of settlement. Accordingly, bhangra as a form of diasporic cultural production became subject to new re-articulations based on various locations and exchanges. Collaborations between the British Asian bhangra artist Panjabi MC and American hip hop artists, or the recent crossover success of Southall artist Jay Sean, demonstrate that the cultural links of diaspora consistently move across national and communal boundaries. This interplay of various diasporic communities leads Gayatri Gopinath (1995, p. 304) to argue that bhangra, as a cultural text, ‘reveals the processes by which *multiple* diasporas intersect both with one another and with the national spaces that they are continuously negotiating and challenging’. Gopinath (1995, p. 313) also argues that these various diasporic processes deterritorialize Punjab and India as the foci of diasporic longing, so ‘that ”India” be written into the diaspora as yet another diasporic location, rather than remaining a signifier of an original, essentialized identity around which a diasporic network is constructed and to which it always refers’.

Raas-garba is a communal-social folk dance form that originated in western India, though now popularly associated with the state of Gujarat. The dance, usually performed during the Hindu festival of Navratri to songs dedicated to various deities, has a strong association with Hinduism and Hindu festivals. The 'raas' component of this dance involves the partnered hitting of decorated sticks called *dandiya* (the dance is also known as *dandiya-raas*). 'Garba' refers to dancing in a circle and requires specific footwork, spinning, and clapping in beat with the song (Yodh 1984). Though raas and garba signify specific dance steps, a much larger range of folk dance forms is often subsumed under the umbrella term 'raas-garba', or often, simply 'raas', 'garba', or 'dandiya'.

Unlike bhangra, the arrival of raas-garba in the United States is more directly connected to its site of origin. Gujarati immigrants in the United States largely came directly from India after 1965, though some emigrated from diasporic locations like Great Britain and East Africa (Lal 2008). Consequently, the history of the folk dance form is significantly less defined by exchange, and unlike bhangra, raas-garba as socially performed in the United States is similar to the dance as it is currently performed in India. As a result, raas-garba lacks the same types of polycultural influences as bhangra. While bhangra music appears in different remixed forms in popular Western music stores and clubs, raas-garba music is largely limited to social occasions when the dance is performed.

From folk dances to folk competitions

Cultural competitions, unlike culture shows, exist on much larger scales, feature singular categories of performance, and usually include acts from all over the United States, rather than a single college campus or limited geographical area. Furthermore, because the cultural competitions are contests, the cultural politics of identity in these performances are even more defined, as concerns over 'authenticity' are often exacerbated by the need to appeal to first-generation South Asian American judges. Additionally, while discussions of the culture show emphasize the role of Hindi (Bollywood) music as a source of cultural nostalgia, folk competitions demonstrate a movement away from this supposition. By turning to regional forms of folk dance, these competitions convey the various scales of identities within Indian American communities, as the same students who might perform a Bollywood dance in the context of a culture show might reject a pan-Indian identity in favour of a regional one in the context of a folk dance competition. By favouring folk dance forms over Hindi film music, bhangra and raas-garba competitions offer a narrower definition of cultural identity.

Folk dance competitions developed out of the established tradition of the culture show, as Indian American students developed an interest in hosting larger-scale events in the competitive tradition of university sports or other performance forms like cheerleading and Western dance. ‘Traditionality’ is one of the most significant formal judging criteria, often taken to mean that the dancers should have some fidelity to the lyrics in their performance, as well as ‘authentic’ dance steps and costumes, though the vagueness of the term enables substantial individual interpretation by judges, who are usually first-generation Indian Americans and former participants in competitions. However, many of the judges regularly serve on panels across the country, somewhat normalizing the standard of ‘traditionality’. Music and song lyrics in these competitions often refer to specific regional and religious forms of celebration, as well as distinctly gendered forms of everyday activities. Accordingly, though the teams are usually mixed-gender, most performances will also feature single-gendered segments of the performance, where only male or female members of the group dance to lyrics discussing specifically gendered experiences of village life.

Bhangra competitions have become a nationwide phenomenon, as numerous universities host intercollegiate competitions every year. Bhangra Blowout, an annual event hosted by the South Asian Society of MVU in Washington, DC since 1994, was the first such intercollegiate bhangra competition in the United States. While the event had humble origins and was originally a small-scale competition in the university’s student centre, Bhangra Blowout now takes place at one of the largest performance halls in Washington and features a concert by a major bhangra performer in addition to the student competition.

In contrast, raas-garba competitions have only recently begun to gain popularity on college campuses. But the Gujarati American community has held similar youth competitions since 1980 under the auspices of the Federation of Gujarati Associations in North America (FOGANA), an organization which represents Hindu and Jain Gujarati Americans. FOGANA’s website (2009) states of their competitions, ‘This is the best possible medium to get our younger generation interested in our heritage.’ The experience of participating in FOGANA events undeniably shaped the later development of similar intercollegiate competitions. The preservation of heritage is a dominant area of discussion during intercollegiate raas-garba competitions, as adherence to ‘tradition’ is a category upon which teams are judged. As Gujarati American students (many of whom were likely involved with FOGANA) saw the success of bhangra competitions, they initiated raas-garba competitions as an alternative form of folk competition that acknowledged their specific regional identity, a need

that was apparently unmet by the existent practices of performance on college campuses. The first Raas Chaos was held in 2001.

Although they represent different regional folk forms, both competition categories convey a dedication to constructed notions of tradition, and thus serve as spaces for discussions of cultural ‘authenticity’.

Aapne Punjab: bhangra competitions and the centralization of the diaspora

Although Bhangra Blowout is primarily a competition of ‘traditional’ bhangra performers, it is impossible to disregard the ramifications of wider Punjabi diasporic culture. The event inevitably features a concert by a well-known British bhangra performer and is thus reflective of diasporic permutations of the folk form. While the competitive performances are concerned with the rhetoric of authenticity and tradition, the wider elements of the event serve as an important reminder of the diasporic significance of bhangra. The concert showcases the importance of sites like Southall in the production and distribution of bhangra music. Furthermore, the event generates a series of club events catering to the numerous individuals who flock to Washington for Bhangra Blowout. But the rhetoric of the competitive portion of the events underscores Punjab’s centrality within bhangra culture, thus undermining the decentralized and deterritorialized model of diaspora that Gopinath (1995) proposes.

Since teams are judged on ‘traditionality’, performers employ various strategies to re-imagine the inherently transnational and diasporic music of bhangra as representative of an ‘authentic’ Punjabi culture. The introduction to these performances can be an important means of framing a hybrid, diasporic performance as ‘traditional’, and consequently it is popular for introducers to speak exclusively in Punjabi while they discuss their act. Phrases like *Aapne Punjab* (Our Punjab) or discussions of the *Pind* (village) and *Punjabiyaat* (Punjabi-ness) dominate these introductory statements. In orienting the audience to bhangra, the multi-levelled, interwoven diasporic history of the performance is never discussed. Instead, the performance is always presented as being representative of Punjab, likely in response to the use of traditionality as a judging criterion. Prize-winning teams are those that score high points in both skill and traditionality. Performances posit their existence as authentic representations of Punjabi culture, while the wider bhangra cultures that surround the event are framed as diasporic contaminations of a ‘pure’ cultural identity. From within this formerly decentralized diasporic community, the diaspora is relegated to the margins of an imagined centre, as

Punjab is reinstated in 'its privileged place as mythic homeland and originary site' (Gopinath 1995, p. 312).

Because diasporic artists, whether or not they demonstrate hybrid aesthetics, produce so much of the popularly distributed bhangra music, several groups resort to only using live music during their acts. Teams often feature second-generation Indian college students playing 'traditional' instruments and singing in Punjabi, mimicking the ways that the diaspora imagines 'authentic' bhangra to be performed in rural and village contexts of Punjab. This is not always possible, however, and many performers must use alternative methods to negotiate with the reality that a majority of available bhangra music comes from diasporic sources.

In a seemingly contradictory mobilization of diasporic temporality and technological modernity in the name of 'traditionality', many teams digitally create their dance mix to epitomize 'authenticity'. The 2010 organizer of Bhangra Blowout noted, 'A lot of teams use computers to make their mixes seem more authentic. With [many types of software] you can alter the bass beats to make them sound like dhol (drum) beats.' In addition, a team at an earlier Bhangra Blowout competition had a mix that featured the gidra (a song performed by a woman) track 'Sajana' by Ms Scandalous, a British Asian performer whose stage name alone should indicate that she does not represent traditional, rural folk music. However, in its appearance within the team's mix, the song was digitally modified so that its remixed and electronic musical components were absent, while the dhol percussion was emphasized. This manipulation of hybrid tracks in the name of 'traditionality' forces a reconsideration of the meaning of 'remix culture' within the South Asian American context. While scholars like Sunaina Maira (2002) have discussed remixes as processes of hybridization and evidence of diasporic cosmopolitanisms, these performances reveal a uniquely diasporic form of remixing that recants hybridity in favour of a blatantly constructed notion of authenticity. In an effort to reorient the diaspora around the 'homeland', these performers often do not unearth a lost 'traditionality', but re-appropriate, re-imagine, and transform existing diasporic cultural production in an effort to imagine Punjab through a rejection of hybrid musical aesthetics. These patterns are similarly present within raas-garba competitions, as competitors are similarly judged on 'traditionality'.

'Straight from the *ghaam*': raas-garba competitions and creation of 'tradition'

In contrast to bhangra, raas-garba's history in the United States is significantly more recent and less autonomous from its presence in

India. Lacking a well-developed uniquely diasporic culture of raas-garba, ideas of authenticity are more rigidly defined within raas-garba competitions, which offer dominant representations of the folk dance form. Accordingly, the politics of authenticity and tradition surrounding these competitions seek to jettison diasporic identity in favour of an absolute 'authentic' Gujarati identity.

The fixation on the representation of 'authentic' Gujarati culture conveys a major departure from Maira's (2002) observations about the production of nostalgia in culture shows. While Maira argues that Hindi films are used as markers of 'authentic' Indian identity, raas-garba competitions demonstrate an intensification of these boundaries. Numerous participants in these competitions have expressed disdain for the overly-Westernized nature of Bollywood performance and, with the exception of occasional 'gimmicks' in the performance (the significance of which we will discuss later), the music selection rarely strays from Gujarati folk music. Many participants from MVU's team attributed other groups' lack of success to their excessively 'Bollywoodized' performance, a criticism that was equally applied to teams that directly drew upon Bollywood films and those who used American remixes or choreography, consequently creating amalgamations that were reminiscent of Hindi films. Referencing an unsuccessful team that allegedly copied choreography from a garba scene in a Hindi film, one male performer suggested, 'Those were Bollywood moves, not actual garba steps.' In addition, after one team used a remix that heavily featured the hip hop artist Soulja Boy's song 'Crank That' and steps from his music video, one male performer from MVU's team observed, 'Obviously they didn't do well, those Auntie and Uncle [a colloquial phrase for older adults] judges have no idea who Soulja Boy is.' Since these competitions have emerged on college campuses from the tradition of the culture show, this attitude is evidence of the belief that performance is a marker of 'authentic' cultural identity. One female raas-garba dancer, for example, noted, 'If you are a Gujarati and you're doing Garba, you see it as a natural extension of yourself... you know it as part of your culture and all that. There are non-Gujus (non-Gujaratis) who see it as just a dance form. But for Gujaratis, you've grown up doing it and have been always exposed to it.' Raas-garba appears as a manifestation of a specific regional identity that cannot be found in the wider category of 'Indian' that is often associated with Bollywood. While performers are often consumers of Bollywood films, they reject the specific types of music and dance that these films convey as inadequately authentic.

The importance of replicating 'authentic' Gujarati culture and tradition in cultural competitions relies upon problematic assumptions about the 'homeland' and raas-garba. The evocation of the term 'tradition' assumes that these folk dance forms display fixity and

stability, which is not accurate. Folk dances have their own history of cultural and social development, and numerous factors, including the changing role of women and religious reform, have led to the evolution of dance forms that are now viewed as 'traditional' (Yodh 1984). Participants in competitions have found ways to mediate these concerns, however, and many discussions of folk dance point to a belief in a uniquely diasporic reclamation of 'tradition'. The FOGANA website (2009), for example, quotes a judge from a raas-garba competition who states, 'What is real is here; whereas, back home, it is Disco-Dandiya.' The captain of Mount Vernon's raas-garba team reiterated this sentiment and argued, 'In a lot of ways, we're upholding a form of culture that people our age in India don't even respect anymore.' Clearly, it is a point of pride for dancers who believe they sustain a form of performance that is ostensibly abandoned by their counterparts in India. This belief reinforces a form of diasporic longing for an 'authenticity' that has been disrupted by the dual forces of temporality and migration. Furthermore, the assertion that raas-garba has digressed to 'Disco-Dandiya' in India puts forward the belief that 'traditional' culture in the homeland has succumbed to the influence of Western culture, a process that diasporic individuals actively resist by revitalizing 'authentic' folk forms. This characterization of the dance form frames performances as reclaimative of a lost cultural identity, rather than productive of a new diasporic culture.

While many discussions of raas-garba competitions propose the recovery of a lost form of 'tradition', these claims avoid addressing the fact that the transplantation of folk dance forms to the context of the American intercollegiate competition requires a level of transformation that ensures that these performances are not replications of 'authentic' cultural practices, but acts that create a uniquely diasporic form of performance. The actual staging of these performances, combined with the need for spectacle and engagement with the audience, requires the creation of original choreography, formations, and stunts, which consequently distinguish these performances from 'traditional' folk dances. However, for many audience members, and often the performers themselves, this permutation of raas-garba is the only available understanding of the folk dance, and claims of traditionalism are often accepted at face value.

The rhetorical and sonic attempt to construct 'authenticity' within a uniquely diasporic presentation is exemplified by the winning 2008 performance at 'Raas Chaos'. As one raas-garba group finishes, a male representative from the next team steps forward to introduce their act. The name of the team is *Ghaamudyaz*, the Gujarati word for 'villagers', a fact that demonstrates that even the minutest details of each team's presentation contribute to its overall construction of 'authentic' Gujarati culture. This romanticized evocation of localized

sites of cultural identity in the ‘homeland’ intensifies what Gayatri Gopinath (2005), p. 31) calls ‘the hierarchical relation of the nation to diaspora’ by adopting an identity that creates a dichotomized relation of the village and the diaspora. Like the rest of the males on his team, the *Ghaamudyaz* representative’s hair is spiked up and temporarily dyed bright red, presumably to catch the attention of the audience, a strikingly untraditional aspect of his appearance that belies his ‘authentic’ Gujarati costume. He takes the microphone and states, ‘We hail straight from the *ghaam* [village], bringing you a traditional *Rasa Lila* dance devoted straight to Krishna *Bhagwan* [Lord Krishna].’ *Rasa Lila* is a form of dance that re-enacts the life of Krishna, a major Hindu deity, and this description of the performance evokes popular conceptions of ‘tradition’. While the actual dance itself might convey a distinctively diasporic form of performance, this introduction rhetorically establishes the expectation of ‘tradition’ and frames the performance in a manner that is important in the construction of an imagined ‘authenticity’.

When the performance begins, at the centre of the stage, a single male performer stands on one foot with his *dandiya* held like a flute, a pose that is associated with the visual iconography of Krishna. Next to him, a female performer also strikes a pose to represent Radha, Krishna’s lover and devotee. As a low-tempo garba beat begins to play, female performers fan out from behind them as they slowly shift their poses. The female performers form a circle around the couple and execute folk dance steps, an act that is meant to replicate garba in its communally practised form, as raas-garba is often performed around images of gods. Furthermore, though men and women now popularly perform the dance, historically, only women danced garba, and this staging attempts to replicate that aspect of the performance.

While the opening act of the performance might fulfil commonplace definitions of ‘tradition’, there appears to be a keen understanding that this tempo and pace of movement is unlikely to sustain audience attention, as the female performers exit and the music abruptly shifts to a faster-tempo *dhol* (drum) beat. From this point on, the entire team enters the stage and presents a particularly impressive demonstration of dance skill. While spinning *dandiyas*, the team shifts between several complex formations, conveying an intense memorization of individual choreography and group orientation. Although much of the choreography draws upon folk dance steps, the formations are presumably original. After a section of the performance in which only the male performers dance, the lights fade. When the lights return, the entire team is in a clump, and a garba song remixed with American rapper Flo Rida’s popular song ‘Low’ begins to play. The audience begins to cheer passionately as the team performs ‘traditional’ raas-garba dance steps to the beat of this remixed song. Despite this enthusiasm, the

gimmick ends quickly and the performance turns to more ‘traditional’ fare. However, as we discuss, these diasporic interruptions are fleeting and unacknowledged, despite their subversive potential in the context of discussions of ‘tradition’. All of the songs are in Gujarati and largely contain lyrics concerned with Hinduism, which, in conjunction with popular neo-orientalist understandings of Hinduism held by South Asians and non-South Asians alike that stress Hinduism’s ‘ancient’ origins (Prashad 2000), affirms the idea that this performance is inherently ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’. While the use of formations and stunts is unique to these diasporic enactments of folk performances, the songs and lyrics, coupled with the rhetoric surrounding the performance, create a narrative of ‘authentic’ ethnic identity for the performers.

Discourses of ‘tradition’ and diasporic interruptions

Despite frequent valorizations of tradition and ‘straight from the *pindl ghaam*’ identity, dance performances in competitions are often characterized by polycultural ‘interruptions’, a keyword in the construction of narratives emphasized by film theorist Lalitha Gopalan (2002) which serve as reminders of the performance forms’ inherent hybridity and the performers’ multiple levels of affiliation and identification.

These interruptions vary greatly. Often, they are musical, such as the earlier discussed example during the *Ghaamudyaz* performance. In addition, during Bhangra Blowout 2009, one performance group briefly included a clip from British Punjabi singer Jay Sean’s mainstream hit song ‘Down’ in their mix, much to the delight of the diasporic and non-Indian members of the audience. In other cases, these interruptions can take the form of ‘themes’, which frequently frame the ‘traditional’ dance in narratives from American and Indian popular culture. One team at Raas Chaos, for example, performed a ‘traditional’ raas-garba interpretation of the popular film *Transformers*, during which they frequently interrupted the ‘authentic’ dance to perform stunts based around the film; a team at Bhangra Blowout similarly referenced American popular culture and interrupted their folk performance to re-enact scenes from the popular film *The Dark Knight*. Teams also frequently turn to Indian ‘national’ popular culture: one group at Raas Chaos recreated moments from the famous wedding scene of the Bollywood blockbuster *Hum Aapke Hain Koun*. None of these moments, however, constituted a dominant portion of the performance.

The inclusion of these interruptions is always a careful balance. If the performers dance to Western or remixed music for too long or reference American or Indian popular culture too frequently, it

directly challenges the rhetorical assumptions about the ‘traditions’ of the ‘homeland’, especially in the eyes of first-generation judges. However, if the performers only present purportedly ‘traditional’ folk dance, it is unlikely that they can fully engage a mixed audience of multiple generations of immigrants and non-Indians. When addressing a question regarding the value of gimmicks, a female performer responded, ‘I think gimmicks... umm... traditions are important, but gimmicks are important because it’s crowd appropriate, and we have to reach out to the American audience’, indicating a simultaneous need to acknowledge and respect the cultural difference between the performers and the spectators. When pressed as to why some gimmicks, like *Ghaamudyaz*’s Flo Rida remix, are acceptable and others, like the Soulja Boy remix, are not, the performer elaborated, ‘If things are overtly American then it’s bad, but if you can fuse it, you’re messing with the idea of tradition, but still keeping it honest, you know.’

The fact that a team can do garba steps to American music is seen as playfully tweaking the idea of tradition, while including ‘Western’ choreography *and* music for longer periods of time was considered too American and therefore inauthentic. Accordingly, these carefully placed interruptions destabilize the homogenizing intent of the rhetoric of these competitions. The necessity of their presence denies the attempt to convey singular cultural belonging among the diaspora and presents the impossibility of these competitions’ rhetorical attempt to collapse multiple temporalities, affiliations, and polyculturalisms into an easily presentable example of ‘authentic’ culture. Even in the eyes of the performers, who consistently emphasize authenticity, the notion of ‘tradition’ remains decidedly ambivalent. Though they disavow hybridity and polyculturalism, these performers unconsciously challenge the notion of ‘tradition’ by actively contributing to the production of new cultural forms.

Conclusion

Second-generation Asian Indian performers of raas garba and bhangra, two distinct types of folk dance, attempt to construct and uphold an imagined notion of ‘tradition’ in reaction to diasporic anxieties over identity and belonging. Although performers in both folk dance competitions place the region and the village at the centre of their rhetoric, their approaches to the realities of diasporic culture vary. The co-evolution of bhangra music with the growth of the Punjabi diaspora in the West makes it impossible to de-link it from diasporic culture. Because diasporic bhangra is so widely known, discussions of ‘tradition’ in competitions like Bhangra Blowout balance the attempt to demonstrate ‘authenticity’ in an ‘inauthentic’

diasporic culture by (re)orienting diasporic identity around the homeland. Though the many unique manifestations of bhangra within Punjabi diasporas are acknowledged and celebrated, the discussion of competitive performances posits that these groups depict the 'authentic' identity of the homeland that is later transformed by the diaspora.

When compared to bhangra, raas-garba lacks a unique history of development within the diaspora and a presence in popular music and club culture. Performers in raas-garba competitions do not need to orient their performance within a diasporic culture, and consequently they deny the possibility that there could be diasporic renditions or interpretations of this 'traditional' dance form. Although bhangra competitions centralize the homeland within a larger diasporic culture, raas-garba competitions appear to disavow the diaspora altogether. In a significantly more binarized approach to cultural identity, raas-garba competitions seem to suggest that diasporic individuals can either entirely reproduce 'authentic' regional culture or be completely detached from the culture of the homeland. Through the need to represent themselves as 'straight from the *ghaam*', Gujarati American performers deny their polycultural identities under the assumption that diasporic culture is inherently inauthentic. While bhangra performers express similar sentiments, diasporic identity in bhangra music and dance and its links to concerts and club culture in the Western world cannot be denied.

Although efforts to construct notions of the 'authentic' culture of the 'homeland' are palpable throughout the performances, the question of whether these homogenizing impulses in the conveyance of narratives of diasporic experience are successful remains. Despite rhetorical emphases on 'authentic' replications of the culture of the homeland, the actual displays of these performances often undermine the rhetorical goal of the competitions. Though the interests of first-generation judges and their expectations of 'traditionality' remain paramount, the realities of a diasporic audience coupled with multiple scales of identity (including identifications as Indian, American, and Indian American) entail that narratives of 'authenticity' are largely unstable.

While we have demonstrated how the supposedly hybrid space of the Indian American folk dance competition is a site for the construction of homogenizing and essentializing notions of 'authenticity', 'tradition', and the 'homeland', we believe that the realities of diasporic life and multiple scales of identity it entails inform the impossibility of such an endeavour. As demonstrated by the necessity of polycultural interruptions in the seemingly 'traditional' performances, the performers' multiple levels of cultural belonging destabilize the notion of 'authenticity' signified during these two types of folk competition.

However, as practices of the cultural competition develop among Indian Americans on college campuses, so does the potential for new directions in the construction of diasporic identity through cultural production. In addition to Raas Chaos and Bhangra Blowout, in 2006 and 2009, an intercollegiate South Asian performance competition called 'Dance Fusion' was held in Washington, DC. In contrast to folk competitions, the performers at Dance Fusion were asked to present performances celebrating multiple facets of cultural identity. In doing so, teams drew on folk forms like bhangra and raas-garba, but also incorporated classical Indian dance, Hindi film music, and American popular music, to present performances that were deliberately poly-cultural in nature. The competition demonstrates a new construction of cultural identity that eschews discourses of 'authenticity' in favour of culture exchange. But, whether these discourses of 'fusion' simply celebrate an assumed diasporic 'inauthenticity' or truly reject the notions of 'tradition' and 'authentic' cultural identity is still debatable. Nonetheless, the multiple discursive potentials of the diasporic cultural competition is a topic in need of further exploration, as this cultural practice can provide important insights into identity formation among second-generation immigrant communities living in an increasingly multicultural country.

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