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‘We start imitating then we innovate’: Ruminations on Indian hip hop with Smokey the Ghost

Sumukh Mysore, better known by his stage name Smokey the Ghost, is a rapper based in Bengaluru, India. He is also an entrepreneur and a protein biologist. Besides having been a rapper for almost eighteen years and having performed in Hindi, Kannada and Tamil films, he has patents to his name and is the co-founder of a company that produces medical devices. In this conversation that samples his journey, he shares his views on the relevance of observations by selected global hip hop scholars about the development of hip hop as a movement in the Indian context. This interview was conducted as part of a pilot survey for a research project that studies the elements of ‘glocalization’ (Motley and Henderson 2008: 248) in Indian hip hop.

Elloit Cardozo: *Could you start by letting us know a bit about your experience in the hip hop industry in India, underground hip hop in India and the mainstream, how it has worked for you, how it has changed over the years?*

Smokey the Ghost: Well, I have been rapping for almost about eighteen years now. I started when I was ten. There was this community called Orkut. And it all began with an emphasis on lyricism. And that's the sort of school of thought I come from. I haven't really thought about whether I'm an underground rapper or a mainstream rapper because there was no such thing at that point of time when I started. Only now, I guess, in the past three or four years, there has been that segregation of underground hip hop and mainstream Indian hip hop, and I'm talking specifically with respect to the Indian scenario. Also I feel like, we had a moment. There was an incubation period when the movement was building. And then there was a breakout period when the movement reached the brim and broke up. I have always performed in the mainstream as well as in the underground and I've done a bunch of movies and a bunch of independent songs. Personally as an artist, I look out for the pieces that I create independently, rather than what I do in the mainstream. The mainstream is generally for me something that I'm doing for another person, for a director or for a movie. It almost translates as commercial work. It's not wherein my, creativity comes to the fore. It's skill, it's not creativity. So I'm not really someone who enjoys the mainstream so much, but I've done it for the money before. But, right now, I'm more of an independent artist thanks to the whole transition that has happened in the last five years. I think I'm able to make a decent amount of money in a decent amount of time for a decent amount of satisfaction from this Indian hip hop scenario.

EC: *And how has your journey been over the years? How has hip hop worked for you as a person, as an individual, as a professional?*

SG: Well, since most of this hip hop thing for me was internal, I've never really looked for external validation. I remember sometimes it happened when I was a kid, but that has changed over time and hip hop has taught me a certain set of things that nobody else could teach me. Just to give you an example, the way that we write flows in hip hop, and the sentence constructions and the structures, it really amplified my writing skills. So, when I grew up and became a scientist, these were the critical soft skills that really helped me frame my papers better. I became a better writer because of that situation. Hip hop also has these references that they make in the song. And there was a big thread on genius.com, a hip hop knowledge aggregator kind of thing. There was this small, description of how rappers have referenced certain very critical situations, could be the Mike Tyson fight, could be something that was a very insider thing. And they put that in their song lyrics and the whole world knows about it but doesn't know about it kind of situation. And if I don't know really, as I'm possibly a hip hop fan first, so I have this interest of going and checking out what happens there. So it's almost like research. And these are things that, the soft skills and knowledge, almost like life advice type of shit that hip hop gave me. And even the company I started recently was because of hip hop. I was at a studio and I was recording some music and then my co-founder Arvind Badrinarayan walked in, he was a veterinarian. He was listening to dog heart sounds and we had this joke about how you could shazam body sounds form a stethoscope for analytics, and it turned into a serious conversation and now a company. So, it's because of hip hop that so many different things in

my life have occurred and it almost stands in that centrepiece, you know. I'm really thankful for that.

EC: *You spoke about how the distinction between underground and mainstream has only started surfacing very recently in the Indian scenario, about how there has been a moment. Now, for the masses, the introduction to underground hip hop in India has been* Gully Boy. *What role do you think* Gully Boy *has played in the surfacing of hip hop or what role do you think it will play in the future development of hip hop in India?*

SG: I think that *Gully Boy* as such was the mainstream breakout, but it wasn't really the first Bollywood situation. Until now, the view of hip hop for most people has been… I'm not saying the breakout is because of *Gully Boy*, I'm saying the view of how you use hip hop had been one constant way before. For example, when we started, we had to wear baggy jeans and we had to look like our American counterparts to be called a rapper. If I had a normal accent while I'm rapping, like how my original accent is, they would be like 'yo, like, you don't sound like a rapper'. That was the general notion of people. So we were almost in this imitation stage, for a long time. And that's how most cultures start; we start imitating then we innovate, right? So in the first part of that situation we actually, especially when I was with Brodha V and Bigg Nikk in Machas with Attitude, we essentially tried to push performance on main stages and stuff like that. As the years passed, we started doing more real stuff. And you had Bohemia, you had 'Pettai Rap'. A lot of original hip hop actually came from the Tamil industry. There was a series of movies before where hip hop was featured: *Chennai Express* was there, *Detective Byomkesh Bakshy!* But they never came with hip hop as the focus, as the central locus point of the whole film. And that's what *Gully Boy* essentially did; it sold the idea of hip hop to a Bollywood audience. Let's be very specific about that, because the Tamil industry has done its bit to sell hip hop to a Tamil audience. It's a huge-ass market. So I feel that there is, at this point of time, some kind of a segregated view. I mean, like, the South. I don't know how much of an impact a *Gully Boy* would have on us because we don't relate to that. There are different kinds of rappers out there and that is something that *Gully Boy* has not yet been able to establish.

For me, it became one of those *Slumdog Millionaire*, rags-to-riches, poverty kind of a situation. It's a great film, don't mistake me, it's a great film. But, I did not like what message was taken home by some of the individuals that watched the film. Because they didn't really educate them about hip hop, they just said, 'hey hip hop is interesting now, you've got to check it out', and you give them a damn cheque and the struggle is justified. And for me the most interesting part of that was how they represented the struggles of a rapper, who is also a normal human being. Because if you look at some of the rappers in the West, somebody like Eminem for that matter, he was white but still came from a struggle, again a rags-to-riches story. You look at 50 Cent, again a rags-to-riches story. But that's not true, you know. Like you know there are rappers that don't struggle and struggles change with the class or society. Because, unlike America, because we are such a diverse culture, we have too many different kinds of people, we can't really draw a central line like Eminem and say everyone's struggles are the same.

EC: *You spoke about how rappers first imitate and then they start innovating. And speaking of how* Gully Boy *has made the gully what everyone wants to be, there are*

scholars in the West who have spoken about how there's a struggle in every hip hop culture between keeping it real and selling it out, or between having your authenticity and doing stuff for money (Grier et al. cited in Motley and Henderson 2008: 250). Not specifically with respect to Gully Boy, *but how do you think we can see this divide between wanting to be authentic to yourself and wanting to be able to reach out to a larger number of people in the Indian scenario?*

SG: Well, in any scenario really, if you look at the greatest of the greatest, you don't care if you have to take care of your family, you don't care about all of those things. You never contaminate an art form. Now I'm talking as a rap artist here, not as a rapper. When you make a segregation and say, 'okay he's a rapper', that's when you consider your segregation of mainstream and underground. The underground is always the initiator of the movement. It's where things start, it's where innovation happens. The mainstream, because it has to be consumed by the mass, its need would be to capture the public interest, you have to water down the art form. You can't really do complicated punchlines, you can't do metaphors. Now that is something that I think really affects the art, and that dynamic is sort of something that worries me. And I really wouldn't need to get into the conversation of underground and mainstream to explain this, but I would get into the conversation of absolute good and relative good. So the real segregation here is between rappers who are rap artists and rappers, basically. That's the segregation, I feel.

EC: *You spoke about how there's almost this compulsion to dumb down your art at some point. Michael Eric Dyson spoke about how, when hip hop starts getting into the mainstream, there's almost this 'specter of mainstream dilution' (Dyson 2011: 64), which threatens the culture as a whole. Do you think the spectre of mainstream dilution is a threat to hip hop as an authentic, resistive culture in India?*

SG: Well, there's always going to be rappers. And hip hop is the sort of genre that stretches. Unlike other music genres, hip hop can be slapped on rock, hip hop can be slapped on trance, I'll be recognized as being a rapper, and, it'll start hip hop. Now, of course, it is a threat, but, I don't think it will affect the underground as much. Again, it really depends on where you come from and who your inspirations are. Even today if you see mainstream hip hop in the West, you'll see that words are being dumbed down, it's becoming mumble. And they used mumbles to describe a particular story or a situation, something like that. So I'm not being worried for hip hop, I don't see it as a threat. But I also think that something like this could generally change the aspirational values of the rapper coming tomorrow. That's who I'm worried about. I'm not worried about the listener; I'm worried about the rapper coming tomorrow and who he idolizes and what he looks up to. That is the real threat to the hip hop movement.

EC: *Speaking of the up-and-coming artists, there is this scholar David Samuels, who speaks about constructed authenticity, who speaks about how after a certain point, rappers, more than being true to themselves, want to be true to this idea of what true is, of what authentic is (Samuels 2011: 152). Do you think that would somewhere start coming into the picture, as authenticity gets constructed?*

SG: Well, hip hop has always been about rebellion. It's always been about going against the norm and not conforming to the system. It has always been like that. And you can't take that away. There is no way that you can separate authenticity and cultural relevance. You take somebody like Dhinchak

Pooja, and look at somebody like Divine. Now if we speak in terms of the numbers game or the mainstream game, it would seem like Dhinchak Pooja is a way bigger rapper than Divine. Although, Divine has the better set of skills here. So, it really depends on what's being said, and not about how popular it is. There are certain kinds of incidents, certain stories or sentiments you can bring as a rapper that are extremely powerful. Like with Honey Singh. Honey Singh is extremely smart. But he had to dumb down his music and make it heard by the people he targeted. Because that mass audience is like that. Unless the audience itself transforms to a more educated and more critical thinking mind, we won't be able to do anything to validate authenticity or cultural relevance. For example in Europe, in UK there's something known as Grime; okay, it's actually hip hop. But because they use their accent to say the words, they removed the influence; it renders a convoluted kind of flow on the beat. So then, in comparison what is Indian hip hop? What is the identity of Indian hip hop here? It has no identity established yet, you know? And that's something that is, for me, of authentic concern.

EC: *You spoke about how Indian hip hop doesn't have an identity as of yet. Craig Watkins speaks about how, as hip hop starts getting famous, there's almost a paradoxical effect (Watkins 2011: 569). One is it gets validated as an official genre. For instance earlier, rap verses would be inserted in larger songs, whereas now, the number of exclusively rap songs being created for the mainstream audience is larger. At the same time it also dumbs down these subversive energies, tries to police these energies. How do you see this paradox as existing within the Indian scenario? How do you see this dynamic and what are your thoughts about it?*

SG: I've seen rappers who have started off and been amazing from the get-go. But they've had to change because their definition of success and a successful rap artist comes with external validation somehow. And that's very worrisome. And that leads to these paradoxes, because it's group identity versus individual identity. If you put twenty people in a room, it is way harder to impress these twenty people than putting twenty thousand people. If I put twenty people in a room and I say something really conscious and intelligent, they'll probably understand it. But twenty thousand people, would look at it and say, 'why is it so boring?' [laughs]. Intelligence would never translate to a larger collective of people. And hip hop is based on knowledge, and intelligence, and struggle and message. And these are words that are exactly contradictory to that. I understand that. When Emiway Bantai or somebody like that describes '*machayenge*', '*chalo machayenge*', let's go have fun. Everybody wants to have fun. Who doesn't want to have fun? So you catch a common blanket and you apply it over everybody, you know? So the only way you can do that is by dumbing down your shit and, of course, it plays with authenticity. You can't help because, capitalism: many rappers prioritize money rather than the reason why they started this itself.

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