SUMUKH MYSORE
Rapper

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ABSTRACT

*This article provides a brief overview of Hip Hop's evolution in India. The first
of two parts in the article trace the trajectory of Hip Hop and rap in India over
the last three decades. The part that follows picks up on Smokey's interview with
Cardozo from this journal's inaugural issue to discuss how Hip Hop in India
has grown from mere imitation to innovation, to eventually become an industry
in its own right. In doing this, we reflect on a simple question: will Indian Hip
Hop ever go from being a native industry to evolving into a lasting subgenre of
its own?*

India has a very diverse musical heritage that includes classical, folk and
popular musics, amongst others, spans several millennia and has developed
across numerous places all over the subcontinent. Furthermore, India's history
as a former British colony makes the country's relationship with the English
language an extremely ambivalent one. English is often seen as a means for
upward social mobility while simultaneously being derided for being a 'lefto-
ver' – a colonial hangover. Indeed, it is as often heralded as the perfect *lingua
franca* for the linguistic diversity of India (in 2011 India was recorded as having
19,569 'mother tongues' which are further grouped into languages [*Census of*

MUST-WATCH VIDS
- Prabh Deep: 'Chitta'
- Skipster/DJ Skip &
  Cizzy: 'Change Hobe
  Puro Scene'
- Smokey the Ghost &
  Aerate Sound: 'Cherry
  Orange'

1. We choose to spell the term 'Hip Hop' with two capital Hs since we believe it is a proper noun given it is the *name* of a culture as well as a global imagined community, a *nation* that transcends geopolitical boundaries. While KRS-One's ways of spelling Hip Hop (2013) and their implications serve as an established point of reference, more recently Iglesias and Harris (2022) have produced a powerful statement (including official statements for evidence) as to why Hip Hop is the correct spelling, both of which play crucial roles in informing our choice.

BEST INDIAN HIP HOP LINGO

- *Bantai* (Bambaiyya/ Mumbai slang): /bʌntaɪ/ = brother/buddy/homie/ mate
- *Gully* (Bambaiyya/ Mumbai slang/Hindi): / gʌli/ = a narrow alley (spiritual equivalent to the 'street' ethos in Hip Hop)
- *Noorak nooru* (Kannada/ Bengaluru Slang): /nʊrək nʊrʊ/ = 100% or an approval of legitimacy (originating from the 💯 emoji)
- *Ek number* (Bambaiyya/ Mumbai slang): /e:k nʌmbər/ = top notch. Full power = top notch
- *Macha* (Kannada): / mʌtʃə/ = brother/buddy/ homie/mate

India]) as it is antagonized as the language of the colonizer. This vast musical and linguistic diversity in tandem with the oft-hostile attitude towards English would not necessarily seem conducive for the growth of Hip Hop[1] in India. In spite of this, having the world's largest overseas diaspora (over 17.5 million according to the UN [2019]) paired with the implementation of economic liberalization policies in India in the 1990s (which made it easier to circulate cultural artefacts) led to a spike in popularity for American popular culture, including Hip Hop music, in India.

Baba Sehgal, who famously covered Vanilla Ice's 'Ice Ice Baby' in the eponymous track from his album *Thanda Thanda Paani* (1992), is often credited with being India's first ever rapper. Because of this film connection, Hip Hop music has been a part of the mainstream culture industries in India since the early 1990s with rappers like Baba Sehgal, BlaaZe and ishQ Bector appearing on movie soundtracks and releasing commercial albums. Around the same time, Jaaved Jaafferi introduced the Indian masses to Hip Hop dance through the dance reality show *Boogie Woogie* which premiered in 1996 and ran sporadically throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Localized practices of Hip Hop, however, only started picking up much later. The first traces of these can be seen in the formation of text-battling communities on Orkut, an erstwhile social networking website, where reputations were built and affiliations were made. Text battles are a form of battling where only text is used to battle with the opponent. This mostly originated on Orkut for the Hip Hop community in India where a scoring matrix was used to rate each rapper based on their usage of multisyllabic rhymes, punch lines, personals, etc. Public voting ended in a decided time and votes were counted by moderators to announce a winner. These winners moved up the leaderboard which was maintained by moderators.

These text-battling communities on Orkut eventually culminated with the emergence of 'underground' Hip Hop scenes in cities such as Bengaluru, Delhi and Mumbai in the mid-2000s. The mid-to-late 2000s also saw Hip Hop dance picking up in India with the formation of underground Hip Hop dance crews in major cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Bengaluru amongst others. The development of Hip Hop music in both of these spaces was largely disparate initially, before Yo Yo Honey Singh became a regular fixture in Bollywood movie soundtracks after his infamous yet meteoric rise to fame as an independent rapper with Mafia Mundeer. A feature that was shared by both the more 'mainstream' and localized 'underground' scenes in the initial years was a tendency to imitate, be it rapping in accentuated 'American' English or in dressing and mannerisms (Cardozo and Mysore 2020: 145).

The late 2000s also saw dance reality shows such as *Dance India Dance* (2009–present) popularize Hip Hop dance amongst the masses, especially the youth. This eventually led to the formation of a mainstream dance-film franchise, India's equivalent of *Step Up*, in the form of the *ABCD* universe (*ABCD: Anybody Can Dance* in 2013, *ABCD2* in 2015 and *Street Dancer 3D* in 2020) as well as the evolution of a distinct Bollywood dance style which incorporates elements from Hip Hop dance styles and street dance amongst others (Chatterjee 2016).

The mainstream iterations of Hip Hop always found sizeable audiences largely as a byproduct of the fact that a large majority of India's mainstream music industry consists of soundtracks produced for commercial films. At a more grassroots level, independent artists initially found audiences in the

mid-2000s when rap battles started becoming a regular part of collegiate cultural festivals (often credited to the popularity of MTV's *MC Battles* [2003] in India) all across the country. With the growing audience for non-mainstream Hip Hop in rap battles, and eventually featured performances at college festivals, independent rappers slowly began taking to the internet to share their work, most notably on the audio distribution platform SoundCloud.

While Hip Hop in India has come a long way from being an oft-caricaturized imitation of the West, it still has a long way to go in becoming a fully grown adult with its own identity. In the early days of imitation, rappers would dress and behave like their American counterparts and rapping in English was considered to be the basic requirement for one to be bestowed with the title of 'rapper'. This has changed drastically over time with artists growing more reassured and beginning to innovate (Cardozo and Mysore 2020). For instance, beats have started having more 'Indian-ness' in that they are often infused with elements of classical and traditional Indian instruments (perhaps following the lead of American Hip Hop producers like Timbaland).

Further, Indian MCs have started rapping in local languages, making rap easier to digest for the masses – as English is still often considered a 'foreign' language and is either inaccessible or alienating to a majority of the population for various reasons. Importantly, rappers like Brodha V have also infused slokas (Sanskrit for a hymn of praise)[2] in their hooks, leading to feelings of affinity with an Indian identity and ownership (even if the beat remains boom bap).

These innovations have made Hip Hop music by Indian artists feel less 'foreign' and, paired with Zoya Akhtar's Oscars-nominated Bollywood blockbuster *Gully Boy* (2019), led to the realization that there is an opportunity to create an actual industry out of rap music. While a handful of independent rappers had previously bagged deals with record labels, *Gully Boy* seems to have ramped up the blurring of boundaries between Hip Hop's iterations in the mainstream culture industries and its more localized practices, with more commercial avenues becoming available for previously independent rappers.

It is quite a task to put one's finger on what exactly characterizes 'Indian' Hip Hop, owing to the multiplicity of flavours, languages, styles and subjects across various regional scenes throughout the country. Our usage of the term 'Indian' Hip Hop throughout this passage then is a mere deferral and in no way an attempt to nullify this dilemma. Instead, we use the term to refer either to the musical productions by artists based out of India, or those that are produced as a part of the mainstream culture industries in India – especially as opposed to Hip Hop artists that are a part of the Indian diaspora (unless the specific work in question was part of a mainstream cultural production in India). The work by these artists falls within the larger ambit of Desi Hip Hop (Hip Hop productions within South Asia *and* by the members of the South Asian diaspora), follow trajectories of development that are almost completely removed from what we call 'Indian' Hip Hop, and are discussed in exquisite detail in books such as Nitasha Timar Sharma's *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness* (2010) and Sunaina Maira's *Desis in the House: Indian American Youth Culture in New York City* (2002).

Being a relatively low-budget and low-logistics form of music as opposed to other genres, especially those that involve bands, the group of people sharing the profit in Hip Hop is usually comparatively smaller, which effectually means that the artists get larger profits in India. Moreover, the tools required

WEB RESOURCES

- Desi Hop Hop: http://www.desihiphop.com/
- Films Division of India's *Breaking All the Way* (documentary film): https://www.mib.gov.in/filmsdivisionvideo/breaking-all-way
- Red Bull's *This is My Hood* (docuseries): https://www.redbull.com/in-en/projects/this-is-my-hood
- Red Bull's *Breaking in India* (documentary film): https://www.redbull.com/in-en/films/breaking-in-india-dance-film
- Vice's *Kya Bolta Bantai* (documentary film): https://video.vice.com/en_in/video/kya-bolta-bantai-1-314/5b1fbb67f1cdb3516b4b2a09
- Vice's *Azadi Records Are A New Wave in Indian Hip Hop* (docufeature as part of Vice raps): https://video.vice.com/en_asia/video/azadi-records-are-a-new-wave-in-indian-hip-hop/5d7a1b1abe40777e66309452
- Goa Hip Hop Festival: https://www.goahiphop-festival.com/
- Breezer Vivid Shuffle (Hip Hop Festival): https://breezervividshuffle.in/

to create Hip Hop music have become more cost-effective with time and one is no longer required to hit the studio to record a song. Indeed, recording can be done using equipment to set up a DIY studio (as Dattatreyan and Singh [2020] point out) even in one's wardrobe, and engineers can turn that into something that is good enough for streaming services. Today there are Indian artists that make the majority of their income from streaming, rather than from performances in live shows. This has been a very rapid and major change in the past two years especially due to the pandemic, and is essentially a convenience that every artist needs.

In India, this has led to a sort of *Industrial Hip Hop Revolution* where brands are approaching even micro influencers to get involved in their campaigns, to create jingles, to make posts – and giving artists a means to earn money. We have also observed that views and likes are becoming less important than customer conversion numbers for brands. More brands want to be associated with Hip Hop given the wide demographic it can target – especially the previously averse older generation that now loves Indian Hip Hop, after *Gully Boy*. Hip Hop music has even crossed over to great effect into reality television with popular shows like *MTV Hustle* (2019–present) and *Red Bull Spotlight* (2021).

Despite this, the next step for Indian Hip Hop is to create an identity around the very fundamentals of Hip Hop and what it means to Hip Hop communities. Just rapping in a native language will only make it more palatable and sellable but it would not change Hip Hop itself in a way that it ends up having a signature Indian sound. Furthermore, changing beats to have Indian elements has long been colonized to the extent that it is not really an 'Indian' thing at all anymore. Producers like Madlib, Timbaland, Pharell Williams and even will.i.am have all sampled Indian music at some point. In fact, Elliott H. Powell details in his book *Sounds from the Other Side: Afro-South Asian Collaborations in Black Popular Music* (2020) how African American musicians' incorporation of Indian musical elements through instrumentation and structure amongst others, is a practice that dates as far as 60 years back. Maybe it is all of these things together that will eventually lead to Indian Hip Hop taking the next step or maybe it is not visible yet and it will emerge from even further innovation.

About three generations of rappers have come out of India thus far: the first being the likes of Baba Sehgal and Apache Indian who introduced India to Hip Hop; the second consisted of M.W.A., Raftaar, Badshah and Bohemia and this was a slightly bigger circle that made it clear that there was a sense of community in Indian Hip Hop, on Orkut; and the third generation: the likes of Divine, Naezy, Prabh Deep and Ikka who have proved the viability of a native Hip Hop industry. The current crop of rappers might also be seen as the fourth generation where Yashraj, Hanumankind, MC Stan, Emiway Bantai and others are taking over the scene. The question remains: what will this new generation add to the existing movement? With the growth of Hip Hop in India, more and more independent labels are now able to churn out profits too. Besides multinational conglomerates like Sony and Universal, indie labels dedicated to Hip Hop music such as Azadi Records and Gully Gang are raking in equally impressive, if not better, turnovers as compared to the conventional record label giants. If we were to predict where Hip Hop in India is headed, taking a page out of the American side of the story, we would say: *experimentation*. Indian Hip Hop is slowly headed towards the creation of its own distinct sub-genre within Hip Hop.

The closest that Indian Hip Hop has ever come to creating a sub-genre of its own is Bhangragga (also known as Bhangramuffin or Bhangra-wine): a musical style that blends Bhangra music with dancehall reggae.[3] This was, however, an exclusively British phenomenon that was short-lived with Apache Indian among those at its forefront, and is pretty much obsolete today. The question remains, will India ever have a moment where it invents a lasting sub-genre like grime from the influences of Hip Hop? While we have overcome the initial tendency for imitation and adopted innovation, when do we break the shackles of identity in a postcolonial country?

The answer is not with us, but it lies in the ageing aspect of persistence. People are slowly but surely seeking new-ness, there are niche markets being created that want to listen to music beyond the mainstream. Niches are big in India, big enough to make enough money to pay one's rent and survive. Working in marketing or booking agencies and managing music artists are becoming full-time career options as opposed to earlier, where Hip Hop artists had to do it all by themselves with very little financial gain. Another repeating pattern is the phenomenon of 'super fans', where having a small group of fans that support every move an artist makes is more important than selling out a show or being able to sell merchandise. However, these niches are currently far and few between and are still growing. This is exactly why we say India is currently an innovative teenager. At present, we are all waiting for experimentation to be appreciated by the masses in order to turn the Hip Hop industry into a fully grown adult with its own identity. Fortunately, we are on our way there – and at a rapid pace too. In the next five years or so, it is quite likely that a new Hip Hop sound will emerge – likely on the internet – that will change how the world sees Indian Hip Hop forever.

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