

Connected Communities

Musics of South Asia: A Means for Connecting Communities?

David Clarke



Background

Executive Summary

Music and other cultural forms play an important role in the life of many of the UK's South Asian communities – offering a means for connection, but equally a way of asserting difference or turning inward. Music and other expressive practices may offer more productive ways to understand and articulate experiences of multiculturalism than those voiced in recent political and media rhetoric. Across a range of writings this scoping study explores these possibilities and reviews literature and concepts germane to them.

Surveying a range of South Asian cultural activities, arts organisations, community associations and networks in Newcastle upon Tyne and its environs (a region not normally featured in public debates about ethnicity and community) contributes a new perspective to the national picture. Analysis of how young Muslim British Pakistanis in Bradford use rap music to articulate the experience of a 'post-migrant' generation offers a corrective to current negative stereotyping of that city. We reveal complexities around characterisations of ethnicity and identity in relation to communities, and highlight issues arising from the current economic recession in a region already marked by economic deprivation.

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Scope, aims and methods

The United Kingdom is home to many South Asian communities. These are defined by geographic origin (e.g. Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi), religion and other social and historical factors. Within these communities music often plays a key role. It forms an activity around which individuals build networks, and a medium through which communities make their culture audible. It may offer a way of turning inward – a symptom of resistance to connection; but, equally, it is also able to cut across such boundaries and potentially connect communities.

This situation offers rich ground for research and engagement. Much musical activity by British South Asian individuals, groups and communities goes unnoticed – so how could visibility and audibility be promoted (where this is desired)? How can music and other expressive practices shape imaginings of a society of multiple – and possibly multiply connecting – cultures?

These and other questions are pertinent for a potentially wide range of stakeholders. While music and British South Asian (hereafter, simply South Asian) communities are our principal subjects, the issues explored may be no less relevant to other cultural formations and other ethnicities. From a disciplinary standpoint, the musical focus elicits contributions from various strands of musicology and ethnomusicology, while the wider contexts invite dialogue with such fields as sociology and anthropology. Those contexts are themselves pertinent on

all scales: global (issues around migration and diaspora), national (national arts policies, national identity vis a vis the concerns of multiculturalism), local and personal (relations between particular communities and organisations, and the roles of individuals within them).

In this scoping study we lay the ground for the more extensive project(s) that would be necessary to address these questions in such a way as to help effect actual change. We do so with a set of outputs that would equip inquirers in such a process, and that variously address the different contextual orders of magnitude.¹ Our literature review (Hodgson and Clarke 2012) develops a discursive and conceptual framework relevant, we hope, to any investigator working with any communities where ethnicity is a criterion; this is supported by an online, thematically tagged bibliography.² Complementing the generalist tenor of these items are accounts by Clarke (2012) and Hodgson (forthcoming) of music making by South Asian groups in specific urban contexts – respectively Indian communities in Newcastle upon Tyne and Mirpuri Pakistani communities in Bradford (the former principally Hindu, the latter predominantly Muslim). In a companion essay to our literature review (Clarke with Hodgson 2012) we collate a picture of community associations, arts development organisations, centres and support networks germane to South Asian and other minority-ethnic communities in the Newcastle area – probably the first time such an account has been assembled. Our methodologies include

¹ All outputs are listed on the Project website: <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/icmus/scholarship/musicsofsouthasia/>. (12 November 2012).

² See www.citeulike.org/group/16625 (12 November 2012).

consultation of formally commissioned reports, statistical data and scholarly literature from a range of disciplines (see above); ethnographic inquiry; internet searches; and individual interviews and a final plenary workshop with representatives from the arts development organisations who have partnered us in this project, and to whom we here record our thanks. Our Prospectus for Future Action can be found on the Project website.

Flowing through much of our account is a concern for multiculturalism and possible roles for music studies in relation to it. A one-day seminar, 'Multiculturalism and Music in Britain', convened by Hodgson and Carolyn Landau at King's College London,³ to which Clarke also contributed (Clarke 2012), galvanised the early stages of the current project. In turn, findings from the project will feed back into a peer-reviewed journal issue currently being developed from the seminar.

Findings

By the nature of its topic, our study has foregrounded ethnicity as a factor in the delineation of communities and cultures (see Parekh 2006:154). This has underlined the ongoing significance of *multiculturalism* in understandings of community relations and local and national identity. The term remains salient in public debates, and for this reason needs to be wrested back from an agenda set by political leaders and echoed in the media since around 2010, which has been fuelled by anxieties around migration and certain manifestations of Islam, and which has targeted particular localities (e.g. Bradford)

as iconic of these trends (Back et al. 2002, *The Daily Telegraph* 2011; *The Guardian* 2010). We also argue that any such reclaiming of multiculturalism needs to take due account of other approaches to cultural multiplicity raised in academic fields such as sociology and anthropology – for example, *Cosmopolitanism* (Turino 2000; Vertovec and Cohen 2002), *interculturalism* and *transculturalism* (Emerson 2011, Gundara 2000; Gundara and Jacobs 2000; Modood and Meer 2012).

The strands of our research that focus on Newcastle and its environs offer a corrective to some of the stereotypes presented in recent public debate – a different place from which to consider the relationship between ethnicity, community and identity. Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups form a relatively smaller portion of Newcastle's local population than is the case with cities such as Birmingham or Bradford (see Cathie Marsh Centre n.d.). Nonetheless, 2001 census data indicate that South Asian communities represent the largest of Newcastle's minority groups. While these data usefully distinguish between Bangladeshi, Indian and Pakistani populations (and show their differing distribution across council wards), these categories remain relatively broad. Conversely, our own ethnographic research, together with interviews conducted with our project partners, offers a more finely-tuned picture of South Asian communities and cultural associations in the region. This suggests a microcosm of the complexity of the Indian subcontinent itself, with groups variously defining themselves through a range of characteristics – region, language, religion, profession, etc. (Clarke with Hodgson 2012: 16–19). Moreover, the fact that these groups

³ See www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/music/events/multiculturalism/index.aspx (5 November 2012).

are not hermetic entities, that people might participate in musical and cultural practices across several of them (and others besides), is a salutary reminder that ethnicity and identity (and with this communities and cultures) are fluid categories and subject to osmosis.

Such profiles are salutary in another respect. They make the point that foregrounding minority ethnicity can help portray alternative cultural images of cities such as Newcastle. These sit elliptically against the more usual image that Newcastle–Gateshead has lately projected, of a city reinvented through cultural regeneration – a strategy prevalent across the UK in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, arguably one consistent with a neoliberalist polity, and the subject of critique from certain academic quarters (summarised in Irving 2010).

The extent to which minority-ethnic groups have been included in such initiatives – which is partly a question of how cultural capital gets to converge with economic capital (Bourdieu 1986) – might be seen to correlate with the degree to which they have access to (or have sought) funds held by, for example, arts development organisations. In our research we have termed such organisations *public facing* organisations, contrasting them with *community facing* organisations. One of the key distinguishing features of the former is that they hold and distribute public money, while the latter emerge from the needs of a particular community and may rely principally on community networks and private funding to remain viable. But these categories too are mutable, often in interesting ways. Arts development organisations that continue to be favoured under the Arts Council's recent radical reformulation of its funding regime (Arts Council England 2010, 2011a), have often

been those which have sustained programmes with 'hard-to-reach' communities. (Our partner organisation GemArts, who have undertaken musical projects with Pakistani and Bangladeshi youth groups in Newcastle's West End, would be one such example.) Conversely, community organisations which have not been able to renew grants from bodies such as the Arts Council appear to have become less public facing and to have returned to their community roots. Yet other community based cultural associations may never have sought significant levels of public funding and seem content to function autonomously – and perhaps to a large extent invisibly to the wider public. On the one hand, then, is a kind of community engagement that would be consistent with notions of 'diversity' currently favoured by public bodies (see Arts Council England 2011b); on the other hand, paradoxically, is a wealth of culturally diverse practices that largely operate below the radar of public representation.

Such activities encompass concerts that stage professional classical artists, domestic get-togethers featuring the singing of Bollywood songs, cultural celebrations prompted by *pujas* (Hindu religious ceremonies), and taxi drivers playing tabla together in their leisure time. For some, these occasions may invoke memories of their familial country of origin – as in the case of Newcastle Bengalis celebrating *Bijoya* (see Clarke 2012). Conversely, for second- and later-generation British Asians, alternative forms of music – e.g. rap – may open up a space in which they can unravel and contest the various pressures and expectations that are placed on them by religious authorities, their parents, and society more broadly – as found among young Mirpuri Muslims in Bradford (see Hodgson, forthcoming). 'Diversity' here signifies an unsynthesisable totality of

experiences differently conditioned by history, religion, geopolitics, generation, gender, socio-economics and class.

Recommendations for future research

A more extended ethnographic (and ethnomusicological) inquiry would be one important means to foster better representation of the complexity of the cultural experience of South Asian and other minority-ethnic groups. Yet this raises important questions about ethics, agency and power: in whose interest would such an ethnography be conducted; who would get to research and write it; and to what end? Well-meaning researchers might need to consider critiques such as that of Sharma et al. (1996), who allege a lingering orientalism in the work of white ethnographers; or those by Asad (1973) and Willis (1972), which highlight the possible neo-colonial and imperialist discourses inherent in the ways ethnographers represent those they engage with. Back (1996), Barz and Cooley (2008), and Clifford (in Clifford and Marcus 1986) among others nonetheless exemplify approaches that pay due self-reflexive regard to the position of the ethnographers in relation to the communities with which they work, and the partial and co-created 'truths' which they portray in their ethnographies, without neutralising the penitence of the critiques previously outlined. Important here is the notion that ethnographies and other engagements might best be formulated as co-creative or collaborative ventures – which would be consistent with the emerging wisdom in the field of community development

(Gilchrist 2004), and with many of the recommendations by researchers critical of the limited demographic reach of cultural regeneration programmes (as reported in Irving 2010).

Baumann's ethnography of the cultural life of Southall (Baumann 1996) – focused as it is on an area rather than a specific community – would represent one salient model for our own proposed venture. Another would be a recent project undertaken in Newcastle's West End by filmmakers Julie Ballands, Taryn Edmonds and Laura Maragoudaki. While not a formal ethnography as such, the web-based 'Archive for Change' (n.d.) represents a rich historiographic repository of documentary films co-created with residents of the area's principally working-class population. The project is suggestive on a number of grounds. First, it represents a form of cultural mapping – something which our arts development organisation partners have indicated to us would be useful for their own community outreach work. A sonic or audio-visual avatar of such an archive (e.g. documenting communities' musical and cultural activities and reflections on them) would thus be a desirable objective. Secondly, a similar focus on Newcastle's West End, but orientated towards South Asian and other BME groups, would be a valuable complement to the Archive for Change project, which has been principally orientated towards white communities. As census data tell us, the West End is now where the city's largest ethnic minority populations are to be found, and these are principally Pakistani and Bangladeshi. Moreover, the West End contains several areas officially listed in indices of multiple deprivation (see Sutherland et al. 2010), raising numerous questions about

the relationship between ethnic diversity and social exclusion (Crow and Mah 2012; Mooney and Neal 2008).⁴

This mapping also points to a hypothesis that would need further testing – namely, that the distribution of South Asian communities in the Newcastle area essentially maps into two fields – the West End and the rest – affording different experiences of community. With higher concentrations of South Asian people, the West End might be seen to represent a convergence of communities of place, identity and interest (to use the classic formulation posed in Willmott 1996). Conversely the more distributed, and in many cases more affluent, South Asian (predominantly Indian and Pakistani) populations elsewhere in the city seem more likely to experience a sense of collective identity through forming communities of interest. Testing out these hypotheses ethnographically and sociologically thus becomes important in understanding whether and how networks operate within and between these communities.

Another community represents a further potential field for future research – namely, successive cohorts of students at Newcastle University who have studied Indian music as an optional part of their curriculum. Interviews with these (mostly white) students, transcribed as part of the current scoping study, suggests that the traditional South Asian *guru–shishya* (master–disciple) approach to cultural transmission is also conducive to communities of learning that represents a valuable complement to the usual institutionalised learning methods of HE. Moreover, their experience with their South Asian teachers would seem to afford a multicultural

phenomenology, which has for some been matched by musicking with local amateur Indian musicians (see Clarke 2012).

These and other avenues for future research are amplified in our Prospectus for Future Action, posted on the Project website, as well as in the final part of Clarke and Hodgson (2012). Advancing these goals will require further building on the networks developed here with our project partners, as well as furthering connections with the whole array of additional community organisations and associations we have identified in our research. Clearly there is no shortage of possibilities here – from projects of modest scope to more ambitious ones; from one-off events to longer-term collaborations.

⁴ See also www.newcastle.gov.uk/your-council/statistics-and-census-information/equalities-statistics (13 November 2012).

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External links: project partners(*) and other community organisations and associations in the Newcastle upon Tyne area

Project website

<http://research.ncl.ac.uk/icmus/scholarship/musicsofsouthasia/>

Angelou Centre

www.angelou-centre.org.uk

The Beacon, Newcastle

www.thebeaconnewcastle.co.uk

Crossings

www.crossings.org.uk/

*** GemArts**

www.gemarts.org/

Intercultural Arts

<http://interculturalarts.co.uk/>

*** Kalapremi**

<http://kalapremi.org/>

*** Kalapremi Online**

www.kalapremi.org.uk/archive/

Millin Centre

http://millincentre.co.uk/

Newcastle Bangladeshi Association

http://newcastlebangladeshiassociation.org/

**North East of England Bengali Puja
Association**

www.neebpa.org.uk

Northern Friends Circle

www.northernfriendscircle.com/

Nunsmoor Centre

*www.activenewcastle.co.uk/venue-results/
view/nunsmoor-centre*

*** Saarang – Arts and Culture**

www.saarang.org.uk

*** The Sage Gateshead**

http://thesagegateshead.org/

All accessed 12 November 2012.



www.connectedcommunities.ac.uk