RAJA KUMARI: THE BRIDGE?

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'*Tryna rep my people but they say I'm not their leader*
NRI up in the bleachers
Feed off what y'all eatin'
Sorry that my sari ain't Indian enough
And America don't love me cuz I'm Indian as fuck'

(Raja Kumari: N.R.I. 2020, Mass Appeal Records)

In 2018, I was visiting Mumbai for a music industry trade conference. Next to the usual topics on royalties, artist management and the desire for Indian music to break into overseas markets, there was an unprecedented panel dedicated to the rising Indian hip-hop scene. I had already added 'City Slums' from Raja Kumari and Divine to my YouTube playlist and was very excited to learn more about underground hip-hop in India. Upon arrival, I discovered that music industry professionals considered the underground hip-hop scene in Mumbai the next big thing. New MCs were amassing thousands of views on YouTube with their homemade videos and the future seemed bright for underground hip-hop in India.

This was particularly noteworthy, as the Indian music industry is still largely dominated by film-related music. Save for a period in the 1990s when some independent artists reached mainstream popularity, it has generally been difficult for musicians to find success outside the film music industry (Lal, Hesmondhalgh and Umney 2023: 294). The largest film music industry is that of Hindi-language Bollywood. Bollywood music still dominates streaming platforms in India despite a growing appetite for global music (Lal 2024). Bollywood music tends to take inspiration from many genres while creating an easily identifiable *filmi* version of music, consumed by a broad segment of society (Beaster-Jones 2014: 15).

Musical artists working in Bollywood have access to large film audiences, which allows them a reach and exposure that is otherwise unparalleled in the Indian music industry. Although the Bollywood music industry mostly functions in a gig economy format, the production, publishing, and distribution of music happen through film and music corporations. Even the increasing popularity of streaming services has not been able to fundamentally change the extant power structures (Lal 2024). Next to this well-organised network, it has been difficult for musical artists to make a living independently from the film industry.

Especially so that Bollywood films have a restrictive set of requirements when it comes to the sort of music and voices, they incorporate. Bollywood songs have historically preferred a certain range of voices and tended to stick to singers, who emulate these voices (Sundar 2023: 65). Moreover,

there is a connection between film situations and the usage of songs. Consequently, the songs featured in films need to convey a certain kind of meaning that befits the narrative situation (Beaster-Jones 2014: 35) Thirdly, recent years have been dominated by the remixes of older songs in Bollywood, and comparatively less music has been released than before (Ameer 2022: 72).

As a result of the strong film-music nexus, although hip-hop had appeared in India earlier, Bollywood quickly appropriated the genre. Rappers, such as YoYo Honey Singh, Badshah, and Raftaar became popular with their hip-hop-influenced party songs in Bollywood during the 2010s. Their music concentrated on the themes of clubbing, wealth, substances, and women, and it was associated with the regional culture of Punjab through its language (Cardozo 2021: 26, 33).

It was in this environment dominated by established industry structures that underground hip-hop, also called *gully* rap[1], or street rap, emerged to carve out a space for hip-hop in popular imagination. *Gully* rap was original, fresh and quickly going viral through content-sharing platforms. Whereas Bollywood rappers were talking about the upper-class aspirations of spending wealth and leisure time, underground MCs, such as Divine, Naezy, Emiway, Dee MC and the other young hopefuls were telling the well-known story of the underdog in the face of structural inequality with fresh edge. They talked about their upbringing in underprivileged areas of metropolitan cities, such as Mumbai (Sur 2021). Their lyrics often referenced their everyday surroundings, such as poverty, heavy traffic, particular areas or local delicacies.[2] These brought their songs closer to the everyday lives of their lower-middle-class listeners than the stories of wealth and endless parties from Bollywood hip-hop songs did. The deep appreciation for their surroundings and the wish to give back to their communities (Rana 2022) provided their music with a certain optimism too.

Another key factor making underground hip-hop stand out was the use of local languages and hyperlocal dialects. Divine, Naezy and Emiway rapped in a richly layered version of Hindi local to Mumbai and its surrounding areas, called *Bambaiyya* Hindi or *Tapori. Tapori* reflects the multicultural nature of Mumbai's population by incorporating linguistic elements from local languages, such as Marathi, Konkani, Gujarati, English, and others. This linguistic style came to symbolise rusticity, authenticity and a deep connection to the lived reality of Mumbai (Cardozo 2024: 692). Rapping in a linguistic style loaded with symbolical meaning, added another layer of rootedness and authenticity to underground hip-hop (Daga 2023: 235).

Most early underground hip-hop tracks and music videos were self-produced with limited means and thus showcased a DIY aesthetic. The ingenious creativity inspired a growing number of low- and middle-income youth across India to participate in the *gully* rap movement as audiences or hip-hop heads (Daga 2022: 137). As Ethiraj Dattatreyan argued in his book about the Delhi underground hip-hop scene, the genre allowed urban youth to reimagine the city and the self in a globally familiar, yet hyperlocal way. As the story of Indian globalization tends to focus on material success and quick rise through the social ranks, the stories of the underprivileged rarely feature in a positive light and the stories of struggle and self-betterment in hip-hop finally offer an opportunity for this (Dattatreyan 2020:3)

It was not only the audiences in India that noticed the growing *gully* hip-hop scene. Music industry professionals were anticipating breaking the monopoly of Bollywood music. The news of *gully* rap spread to the populous Indian diaspora too, with the BBC Asian Network dedicating an entire documentary to the growing scene (Friction 2018). It was amidst these developments, that Raja Kumari, an established Indian-American songwriter moved to Mumbai.

Despite having been nominated for a Grammy earlier, she felt that as an artist fusing hip-hop with her Indian heritage, the United States did not allow her to thrive (Kirpal 2021). She hoped that India could provide her with the visibility and platform that she lacked overseas (Sidewalk Talks 2019). 2017, the year that she moved to India was a moment ripe with opportunities. Divine and Naezy had started to find success with their track and the independent music scene seemed to be on the verge of a mainstream breakthrough. In addition, the Bollywood film music industry was ready to accommodate artists from the diaspora too: Raja Kumari was one of the artists from the Non-Resident Indian communities, who shifted to Mumbai around this time.[3]

 Raja Kumari found initial success upon collaborating with Divine on 'City Slums' in 2017 and had subsequent appearances in talent shows and Bollywood film soundtracks. Her early lyrics talked about her aim of becoming a global voice for India and reflected a feeling of homecoming upon her move to India. For a while, it seemed like her decision to shift her base to India had paid dividends and she could ride the *gully* hip-hop wave. However, over the following years, she released a musical oeuvre consisting of three EPs, an album and numerous singles, that spoke about the challenges of finding her feet in India as a returnee member of the diaspora. She has been vocal about her struggles in the unorganised Indian music industry (Sur 2023b) and allegations about not being Indian enough to be associated with the underground hip-hop scene (Kirpal 2021). Her 2023 album, entitled 'The Bridge' seems to reflect upon her desire to become an interlocutor between East and West while being firmly anchored in India. In the following, I suggest that this venture has remained incomplete.

Raja Kumari's career serves as a poignant case study for illustrating some of the complexities of ethnic return migration in conjunction with gender and genre. In this article, I focus on the perceived problems of authenticity that she conceptualised along the dichotomy of not being '*Indian enough*' in India and being '*Indian as fuck*' in the US in the lyrics of her song 'N.R.I.'[4] Moreover, even though underground hip-hop in India has gained mainstream visibility, stories of the personal struggles of rappers still form an integral part of the scene's self-representation. How does an English-speaking female MC from the diaspora figure in this situation? What are the opportunities and challenges that this positionality creates and how did it affect Raja Kumari's career?

In the following, I provide an overview of Raja Kumari's strategies for crafting an artist persona that blends elements of global hip-hop culture while grounding it in an interpretation of Hindu culture. I then look into some of the debates on authenticity and belonging with regards to her position in India that undermined her goal of becoming the bridge of underground hip-hop to the rest of the world. I finally argue that the ways in which she put forward her claims for authenticity reflect some of the pitfalls of Orientalising discourse that she tried to fight in the first place.

All around the world
No matter where I'm from
They gonna know I'm made in India
(Raja Kumari: 'Made in India,' 2022, Godmother Records)

Born in 1986 in California as Svetha Yallapragada Rao, daughter of first-generation Telugu-speaking immigrants, Raja Kumari achieved considerable success in the American pop music market as a songwriter, composing for Iggy Azalea, Fifth Harmony, Gwen Stefani, and Fall Out Boy. However, the

American music market had no substantial Indian representation (Uproxx 2016), despite the surge of interest in South Asian culture in the United States in the 1990s. That trend was mediated through mainstream cultural icons such as Madonna or the Olsen twins, who used elements of Indian culture, such as *mehendi* or *bindi* as exotic fashion accessories (Maira 2002: 134).

Raja Kumari perceived this use of Indian markers as cultural appropriation, and she took it upon herself to provide a more authentic representation of Indian culture (Charbit 2019: 29). She strives to convey an identity that incorporates elements of her upbringing as a child of Indian immigrants in California. In her interviews, she identifies classical Indian dances and Hinduism as practised by her mother as the key elements of Indianness from a personal point of view (Kirpal 2021). These experiences deeply influenced her when she created her performer alter-ego of Raja Kumari. based on her understanding of goddesses in Hindu mythology in terms of ideological standing and looks (Sidewalk Talks 2019).

Her connection to Indianness through Hinduism is further emphasised by conveying a narrative around art as a divine calling. She traces her artistic beginnings to her childhood when she learned the classical dance forms of Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi and Odissi which often depict stories from Hindu mythology (Sur 2023a). In her interviews, she emphasises that for her, art, whether dance of music, is a devotional practice. In the past, she used her dance shows to donate to charities in India and giving back to the community forms an important part of her rhetoric and a facet of spiritual practice too (Sidewalk Talks 2019).

The central role of spirituality is evident in her musical output too. She often uses terms and imagery associated with a blend of East-West spirituality and crafts a visual world based on modernized Hindu iconography. The lyrics to her song 'Meera' discuss the concepts of karma, the role of manifestation, and the unity of the universe. The music video shows her transition from a princess-like figure to a mendicant, mirroring the life journey of the legendary Rajput princess, Mira Bai, who gave up her royal life to devote herself to Krishna. Her song 'Karma' identifies her as the 'Queen of Hindustan',[5], whereas the visuals show her posing with a pop-art tiger, reminiscent of a goddess with her mount,[6] while neon-coloured demons dance in the background.

Her visual image replicates the effort of blending modernity and Hindu iconography. Her signature looks fuse hip-hop fashion with Bharatanatyam costumes and Indian classical dance wear. She often wears hair extensions to recreate the traditional Indian beauty look of long and heavy locks, decorated with jewellery, such as *maang tika*s worn at the centre parting or *mukuta*s, ceremonial crowns associated with the iconography of Hindu goddesses. The centrality of wearing gold jewellery is a point of connection between global hip-hop culture and traditional Indian beauty standards and Raja Kumari capitalises on this.

Her heavy makeup is often reminiscent of the stage makeup of Indian classical dancers, who use it to emphasise facial movements which form an integral part of storytelling. As such, Raja Kumari's sartorial choices play a crucial part in creating a sense of Indianness. However, it is important to point out that by displaying these visual markers of Indianness, she also plays into Western stereotypes about India and Indian femininity. The focus on the ancient nature of Indian culture, equating it with Hinduism and emphasising the spirituality of Indian culture are all well-known Western tropes about India.

'But no country for women, I don't fit in either quotient'
(Raja Kumari: N.R.I. 2020, Mass Appeal Records)

Despite having claimed to be 'Indian as fuck' in the US, Raja Kumari could not seamlessly fit into India either. Initially, she collaborated with members of the Indian underground hip-hop movement, but she soon faced criticism on account of her financially privileged upbringing and transnational capital compared to the others on the scene, as well as her perceived lack of understanding of the everyday realities in India, that I shall discuss in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, as the child of white-collar immigrants to the US, she grew up with significantly more opportunities than her contemporaries in Mumbai, or even her own parents in India in the 1960s and 70s.[7] This set her apart from the rags-to-riches stories of other scene members. Moreover, her arrival in Mumbai coincided with the commercialisation of underground hip-hop and she could benefit from the increased interest surrounding the scene. Sports and alcohol brands teamed up with underground rappers to advertise their products (Daga 2023: 233). Bollywood picked up the story too: *Gully Boy*, a film based on the lives of Naezy and Divine was shot with Raja Kumari's cameo.

As a result of her extant industry connections, she had also been signed by some of the biggest music labels, such as Sony and Mass Appeal before grounding her own label, Godmother Records (Rathore 2023). She could also benefit from the film music industry by singing for Hindi and Telugu films. Whereas her voice and the style of her songs set her apart from other female singers, she came into the film industry as a result of established connections with Indian film stars, such as Madhuri Dixit or composers, such as Anirudh Ravichander and A. R. Rehman (Adgully 2023). The commercialisation and Bollywoodisation of hip-hop were widely criticised by audiences, who felt that the appropriation of the genre by the upper classes was taking away the authenticity of the scene that is deeply associated with class and caste struggle (Cardozo 2021: 40), and Raja Kumari could also have been read as part of this trend.

Another issue related to questions of personal authenticity regarding Raja Kumari. In 2019, MTV India started 'Hustle,' a hip-hop-themed talent hunt show, with Raja Kumari as one of the judges. She was framed as the bridge between US music industry trends and the Indian underground hip-hop scene (PTI 2019). However, the earlier discussed importance of vernaculars in underground hip-hop and the fact that Raja Kumari does not speak Hindi fluently put her ability to judge the participants in question. (Balram 2018).

In addition, she was criticised for being insensitive towards the realities of caste cleavages in India. In 'Roots' her 2018 collaboration with Divine, she rapped "untouchable with the Brahmin flow," which led to widespread outrage as it seemed to promote caste hierarchy by pitting the virtues of the highest caste against disenfranchised Dalits. The lyrics were deemed casteist and insensitive by some outlets, who argued that these lyrics show that the author does not understand the lived reality of caste and discrimination (Buckshee 2018, Kapoor 2018). This could be considered a jab at her diasporic background, further emphasising her position as not-quite-Indian, as conversations around caste discrimination often take a backseat in the global Indian diaspora (Kumar 2021:4).

The 'Roots' debate directed the focus on her self-perception of being an interlocutor for Indian culture and Hindu values from an insider position. The criticism was especially poignant in light of Raja Kumari's frequent claims of representing the people of India (Sony 2019) and her criticism of

Western pop music appropriating Indian culture. In a 2017 interview, she recounted that the key reason for her to start her performing career was watching Iggy Azalea wear the crown of an Indian goddess without understanding the spiritual meaning of it, which made her realise that she should rectify this sort of representation in mainstream popular culture (Uproxx 2016). The 'Brahmin flow' fiasco has ironically mirrored the criticised phenomena of a cultural *faux pas*, that forced Raja Kumari to apologise for not being familiar enough with the lived experience of caste discrimination in India. Nevertheless, she rejects those who want to make her "the poster child of caste supremacy" and emphasises that it is her right to continue to use Hindu iconography, so long as other rappers are accepted to flaunt crosses and display their Christianity (Asian Culture Vulture 2020).

How should we read Raja Kumari's career and star persona in the light of the above-mentioned debates and her self-professed mission to act as the bridge between East and West, India and the US? I suggest that, despite the initial optimism created by industry trends, her hopes and dreams have not quite manifested in the way they were expected to. Raja Kumari could not become the voice of the Indian *gullies* taking the Western world by storm. Reflecting on the critical moments in her career can be traced in Raja Kumari's lyrics that analyse her relationship to her diasporic identity vis-à-vis the US and India. There is a tangible change in her tone, which has shifted from celebratory in her releases during her early Mumbai days to disenchanted during more recent releases. She portrays herself as the misunderstood diasporic subject who is cursed with diasporic hybridity. Having relocated to India to escape the perception of being 'Indian as fuck' in America, her authentic identity as an Indian was called into question in the often-praised motherland. This not only draws attention to the fact that privilege and representation – or the lack of it – are context-dependent but also to the fact that the figure of the NRI is still very much under debate. Whereas on the one hand, the lifestyle of the NRI is coveted and aspired to, on the other hand, upon their return to India, NRIs are often considered '*ain't Indian enough.*'

However, I would suggest that the debate is probably misplaced in its entirety. Raja Kumari's Orientalising vision of India and the Indian audiences' critical stand on it are consequences of historical processes and different trajectories of aspirations that are unlikely to merge in the future either. However, in the process of trying to bridge India and the US sonically, maybe Raja Kumari has become the authentic sound of the struggle of being in-between and should be read as such.

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Endnotes

[1] Gully is the Anglicized spelling for the Hindi word for alleyways that characterize the old cities and slums in India.

[2] An example of this could be Divine's *Yeh Mera Bombay* ("This is my Bombay") released in 2014, that paints a lively picture of Divine's bustling home city full of contradictions and beauty.

[3] Jonita Gandhi and Lisa Mishra, since-established playback singers from Canada and the US respectively (Singh 2014, Chakraborty 2021), Shah Rule, another rapper brought up in Russia and London (Ferreira 2023), Rishi Rich from the UK and others were all trying their luck in India.

[4] N.R.I. stands for Non-Resident Indian, a popular term to denote people of Indian origin living abroad.

[5] Hindustan is a Hindi-Urdu name for India, often used in colonial times.

[6] In Hindu iconography, deities are associated with particular creatures that serve as their mounts or *vahana*s. Certain avatars of the goddess use the tiger as their vahana.

[7] Her early childhood exposure to classical dance stems from the fact that her parents were in the financial position to invite a renowned classical dance teacher to live with them and train Raja Kumari as a child. This was the same guru that in her youth, her mother had intended to go to but had no money to do so (Sidewalk Talks 2019).

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