

Sangam by Aditya Desai
Opening Pages, novel-in-progress

“I don’t really care man, just play the cool shit. People are here trying to have fun. We wanna make this a good party, you hear?”

Cool shit. Of course, back then Amar had to admit, he thought it was cool shit too. He was suckered into all of it, the pop-rap that was lyrically dirty but artistically neutered, the aura of the inside of a BET music video but the squad of boys in baggy pants is brown acting like their own little G-Unit, inside this little country house inn they’d rented a few short miles off campus. Were the lights on, his crowd would all see accouterments of their New-World namesake. The inn had been in the same family for generations, whose obsession with the Native land it was built on had come across, as if such a thing wouldn’t have been true anywhere else, wampum belts hung above door frames, totem poles in the corner, fake wax corn stalks on display when you walk in.

It was all bullshit, just like the bullshit they fed him just days after after rejecting him for the frat, and they’d called him up anyway with a, “hey man, you DJ, right?”

He knew he was just a replacement for one of the brothers had his own little set up. He’d done all the parties for the two years Amar had been at this college, the two years he’d spent trying to make friends with them, pretending he cared about basketball, about BMWs, about what the best hand in poker was – but he’d graduated out, or dropped out maybe, who knows. A 25-year old in undergrad was becoming an unseemly thing and eventually a parent is going to step in and threaten that either finish he degree or get comfortable taking the night shift at Dad’s 7-11. And if that doesn’t work, we’ll just threaten marriage over your head. Nothing gets a brown boy hustling more than the threat of tradition and adult responsibilities.

They all went by nicknames: Rick and Vik and Ash and Tash and Sam and Kam, the ones who went around starting every sentences with “aww, snap yo!” throwing up their gang signs and waving handkerchiefs with skull signs on them, even though they’d spend rest of the night trying to figure out how best to tie them around their faces, because of course tomorrow when everyone looks at the photos online they will have to see that these guys were the real deal, looking like a cartel gang that had absconded from Colombia and set up shop at a typical state school on the east coast.

“I’m serious, just keep it classic, keep it hot, know what I mean?” His frat name was Cobra. Cobra had leapt up onto the stage when Amar had thrown on extended mash-up tracks he’d downloaded off the internet. Dance mixes of Ludacris, DMX, and whatever else had gotten old school in the eighth grade, why anyone still cared. Why play that, when there was old school hip-hop. Why play that shitty pop track when there was the original thing they sampled from some other country? There

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was a funk to get down and the EDM and go wild? Why hire him at all if they already knew the playlist?

He'd started strong but then as the up-tempo descended into fades and flangers, everyone gave up and went back to the Gatorade pitcher of beer in the corner.

The tricks these boys get up to. Parlor shenanigans, building an image fit for banners with an arcane pseudonym that sounds like an energy drink or a mid-range sports car. Amar himself had gone by some real stupid monikers: DJ Mughal, DJ Bombay, DJ Taj, and when someone told him he was basically going down the list of Indian restaurant names, he tried a few more creative ones - DJ Mohabbat, DJ Sunburn. For awhile he tried gut-wrenching as DJ Amor, despite not knowing much about Latin music.

And why was there a gag rule on any Indian? He knew for certain, no matter what, a bhangra break down would kill, the Punjabi attitude fitting so comfortably into the night's thug aesthetic.

More bullshit: every brown guy on campus with a laptop and enough time to surf iTunes considered himself a DJ. There were seventy types of cheap software to download to cut and splice music tracks. The digital had opened up a whole new vista for the pent up ones who never figured out how to dance, never got into sports, and couldn't drink more than shot of vodka before going into spins. It was the new peacocking for the nerds-in-waiting, the guys who just needed to sit and collect tunes from the comfort of his dorm room bed, jamming out on headphones while everyone else was studying.

The malaise of brown boys in America is that middle gap when they're not quite adults but racing as fast away as they can from anything resembled by their childhoods.

What would they think if they came in and heard this weird shit? Newness was uncomfortable, unwanted in those days.

We were in the back watching, Erfan and I, wondering what we were doing there. It was a brown party sure, but a tangent cut too far for our use. He was busy playing critic:

"See? He should've just dropped the needle there. He didn't have anything cued."

"You should go up there, show him."

"No. Not wasting my talents on these people."

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“What’s wrong with them?”

“That they came here in the first place.”

That’s why they were all here. You had to be scene, from behind the books, out of the classrooms, prove you could drink hard, party hard, get hard, loud and in the face. It’s what they all got taught, whether or not they want to admit it, by all of those Bollywood dance numbers with those lip-syncing actors who couldn’t sing shit for themselves, but still have to sell it like their characters did. Silent screen acting for a musical film, a total discordant showcase of trying to please others at the cost of not really doing best yourself.

Many didn’t know much about Amar before he showed up on campus, and once he did, they rarely thought about him any deeper than a passing acknowledgement of his presence in the room, they never felt compelled enough to inquire into his past. Brown community is small, with everyone grasping at, like little candy gems in a trail mix, relations and acquaintances from the old country, across schools and societies.

There was a radio station on campus, with a Macintosh computer with some cost-effective editing software, a serviceable microphone and a modest four-channel soundboard for input. But he hung around long enough to cozy up with the station manager, a fifth-year senior who was really excited to get into some of the “cultural flavor” of the student body, and gave him half an hour to play whatever he wanted. He kept no friends; sought out no girlfriends (less about any personal predilection about abstinence than it was about making sure their parents didn’t somehow already know their potential lover’s family).

For thirty minutes, he played a carefully crafted set of the history of Bollywood, starting from some late seventies hits of Kishore and Lata, moving it into some of the mixtapes that had started to pour out from the Asian Underground – how did these rudeboys from London and Toronto figure out those tired old songs that probably drove them mad in childhood could become slick back beats for a rap vocal? Finish it off with something contemporary, now that Bollywood had taken notice and started co-opting the underground, and suddenly Rishi Rich and studio-pop bhangra were what all the heroes and heroines were dancing to on the screen.

He called the show *Sangam*, the confluence. What can music tell us about history? How can we connect with heritage through our music? He was pretty damn proud of himself.

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For Amar the show was a private expedition of his own, one made in the imagination, connecting with the culture through rhythm, dhol, bass, a constant discovery that he was outside of the shared code of what was trendy or new or hot or not. Music had always been a quiet, tranquil affair, hours in his basement on the computer with dial-up internet, locked into huge headphones and scanning whatever was new and available for downloading. And then suddenly, the explorer washed up onto shores of his modest state campus, and there are more brown students than he knew how to keep track of. There were rich ones, poor ones, ones who spoke only English and ones who spoke three languages at home. The first week he lost count of how many new crushes he formed from the novelty of seeing a desi girl in blue eye shadow.

Around midnight people started packing in. Amar ripped into the top forty, mainlined American for now for the moment. There was no need for reggaeton, no need for that curio out of Romania, no need to rock any cultural boats just yet. The laptop did its work, while he periodically twisted a knob or set off the flanger effect to make it seem like he was doing something. He hadn't even touched the decks all night.

In the distance, he sees the bar, where they were selling their own stash of cheap beers at the bar, and behind that, a curtain that leads into the kitchen, and through the curtain emerges Kiran, the girlfriend that ended up happening anyway, with a red cup in one hand and Cobra in the other. He strokes her hair, and leans in so they are cheek to cheek, and Amar barely misses the next cue.

When he looks up again, she is crossing the inn, a gait too gallant for the party, waving to each friend and acquaintance, which comprised most of the room, before getting to the stage. She hops up to the stage and puts down the cup.

“What were you talking about back there?” he asked.

She lifted a cup from off his ear and pecked a kiss onto his lobe, then put her face close to listen in. She put it back.

“What? Do you want some?”

He nodded, and she lifted the cup to his lips while his fingers worked the controls. It wasn't cheap beer at least, but cheap rum and coke.

“Where'd you get that?”

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“They have a stash in the back.”

“Can you get me one?”

“Just take this one.”

“You can keep it, I just mean when you get a chance to get another.”

“They don’t have a lot. It’s just for them.”

“I don’t want yours. You can have yours. I’m just saying—”

“I wasn’t even supposed to have one. They don’t want everyone finding out.”

“You think I’m going to shout it out on the microphone?”

They had gotten together not long after last year’s *Kulture Dhamaka*, when Amar had somehow gotten himself drafted into the fashion show, which really was showing off the most expensive thing your parents were able to bring back on their last trip to India. She had needed someone to cut together the mix for her dance.

When else had a pretty popular girl asked for something from him? It was an easy exchange.

“Come on, I’m not that stupid.”

“Here, just have it,” she said.

“Watch it!” The drops, jumping out of the cup, scaring him with mortal pangs. “I tell you every time.

“Come on, I’m not that stupid.” She reached up and pecks him again.

It didn’t take them long to become the fiery couple on campus, spitting and smacking and suppressing their own dramas into small corners of the campus. Among the brown kids, the couples who were brave enough to publicly declare themselves to the world felt an obligation to make it into spectacle, recreating the grand melodrama of the films and TV serials their parents vowed by and they claimed to hate, but it was spicy gossip that kept them at the tip of everyone’s tongue. We all tuned in, those of us nodding off in the back of lecture halls or those ditching class in dorm rooms, those of us drinking stale water and eating stale shrimp chips, reminiscing about the party as if it was a memory from years ago. We agreed we hated most of what had happened, but it had been fun at the same time.

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He was realizing throwing down decks for a dance party wasn't the same as running a radio show. First problem: there's two decks. Four straight hours, mixing from one song to the next without playing the whole thing. Far cry from the luxury of an entire week to program thirty minutes. And of course

Second problem: It was live. You're not going to cut into the middle and give an anthropological history about why the song feels like a defined moment in South Asian music history, not when the room you're in has a tray of jello vodka shots sitting on a table next to a wood-carved statue of an chief with his palm upright, facing outward, like so many idols of Mata Durga they all knew from temple.

Third problem: In the end, they weren't there for the music. A group of girls in the corner shaking back and forth as they carried on a conversation, or a couple at the bar doing a two-second grind out of muscle reflex, because they'd had four years of high school and never learned how to dance any other way. Everyone else stood around with a red solo cup yelling at other, the same conversations. They were all so excited to be off on campus, some clearly in unfamiliar situations. They pointed at the cups as if to say, *what's in here*, and craning necks around to see there was someone else, someone to run to, another face to register tomorrow they had all been here and not anywhere else.

Kiran comes back.

"You drank it all."

"Sorry. You said I could have it."

"Can you come outside?"

"Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Pricha forgot her ID."

Amar did not get along well with Kiran's friends, who blended together for him in something RichaPreetGita, an amalgam of right-parted bangs and blue eye-shadow that went into a repository into the back of his head, the gaggle of girlfriends every *saas-babu* had on a television serial, aping Kiran to do one thing or another that made her a more insufferable person than he thought she could be in their more solitary moments.

"So what?"

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“They won’t let her in.”

“They’re letting all of their friends in.”

“Can you just talk to him, please?”

“Why can’t you? You get all of the secret access.”

“Just, come on— ”

“I’m busy here. She should’ve remembered.”

Amar, the poet-sociologist, the observer of peoples so unfamiliar and yet his own, felt empowered to do something.

Right now the mix was in the 120s. He pushed the bpm fader little by little, and pulled some special treats he’d found online; dance remixes and mash ups of stuff he’d already burned through and knew had a second chance. They caught a few more, fists went up in the air, and people looked his way for the first time that night, this new face they realized they didn’t know.

Headphones on, eyes down. Volume up a couple notches. Drown it all out. Keep this techno remix set – Rihanna, Jay-Z, Britney – it was all in a comfortable 130 that would get these people moving just fast enough to keep the blood pumping, but steady enough to lull them into a trance. He sees drinks tossed off the bar, the table, any empty surface they could find. People are singing along to the lyrics. In the dark room, the frat guys have put on sunglasses for some reason. *Make them forget about you again.*

Now drop it down. A down-tempo mix that took it to the 100s, deep into dirty south: Lil Jon, Ludacris, the Three-6 Mafia. The Snap-Yos got excited and put on their skull and bones handkerchiefs across their faces, and cleared the floor to do some kind of showcase dance where one by one they took the center going *woof-woof-woof* like a pack of dogs. Amar didn’t care, there was finally some excitement, and besides, they’d almost given the perfect excuse for a palette cleanser.

The shame about bhangra was that it mixed perfectly well into hip-hop, and both brought out a machismo in brown boys that was hard to bottle once it got out. Immediately the Cobra came up to him behind the decks and grabbed Amar’s shoulder.

“Hey man, what’d I tell you?”

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“I’m just playing the crowd.”

“The crowd’s here either way, man. They’re not paying you, we are. Just do what I say.”

“Okay, just a couple more songs and I’ll switch back.”

“No. Now.”

The beats began to skip. He shook the hand off his shoulder, “get off man, you made me miss the mix!”

“If you were playing – hey man listen – if you were playing the right stuff, I wouldn’t of wouldn’t of had to –“

The mix got back on track, but the attention had brought another Snap-Yo over. Cobra let go of Amar.

“This guy’s playin – look man, you’re still playing it! Switch back out to the hip-hop, that was good.”

His friend shrugged his shoulders. “This is okay, I guess. People seem to like it so—”

“What about this: just play out this song and then switch back, aight?”

“Here’s an idea,” Amar said. “Get the fuck out of my face, aight?”

In taking the punch to the gut, Amar didn’t realize how quickly he went down and how quickly he came up again. To anyone else in the darkness, it probably just looked like he’d gone under the table to look for something, but we’d been doing nothing but watching him the whole time, on the stage, our own private little soap opera, and in in so unglamorous a fashion. But audience or not, in that moment it wasn’t hard to see him try to cut an image of Amitabh, bloody lipped and down on his knees, a poster image of a movie he’d never seen but had a perfect idea of how is climaxed: the cackling-mustachioed villain, teeth gnashing, staring down at our beaten hero, who, with rage in his eyes channels the might of the Gods in his fist and brings the cut up and out - *-Disboom disboom.*