

NEGOTIATING SONIC SPACES: EXPLORING URBAN INDIAN YOUTH AND THE SEMANTIC FLUX OF ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC CULTURE

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, electronic dance music (EDM) has gained immense popularity among India's urban middle-class youth, driven by the rise of commercial EDM festivals and local artists. This study examines how Indian urban youth engage with EDM culture (EDMC), focusing on participation, performance and consumption, as well as the meanings attached to EDM within this demographic. Based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews (2020–2023), the research highlights the shift of Indian dance music scene from its global underground origins to a commercialised mainstream culture.

Annual, commercial multi-day festivals, featuring diverse genres, are central to EDMC in India, fostering a translocal ethos. These events, distinct from global rave culture, cater to middle-class, cosmopolitan youth navigating tensions between traditional values and global aspirations. This article elucidates the bicultural identities emerging from these negotiations, showing how contested understandings of dance music shape cultural practices and collective identities within India's urban youth.

KEYWORDS: EDMC, ethnography, popular music, youth culture, urban Indian youth

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INTRODUCTION

Electronic dance music (EDM) has evolved into a prominent cultural phenomenon among urban, middle-class and globalised segments of contemporary Indian youth, particularly over the past two decades. This emergence is marked by the proliferation of translocal, commercial festivals, a growing visibility of local artists and the incorporation of the genre's sonic sensibilities into mainstream Bollywood music. While the adaptation of electronic dance music culture (EDMC) in India prompts critical inquiries into how urban youth negotiate cultural identity, belonging, and community within a globalised framework, scholarly attention of its localised manifestations in the Indian context remains limited.

In this study, based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted between 2020 and 2023, I seek to address two key questions: first, the cultural practices surrounding EDMC participation, performance and consumption in India. Second, the ways in which urban Indian youth interpret and employ the terms EDM and EDMC. In the Indian context, the genre is predominantly associated with DJ nights and performances by both international and local artists. However, the Indian culture diverges from its global trajectory, transitioning from its subcultural, underground origins to a commercialised, mainstream cultural form.

Among the most notable aspects of this culture in India are the annual multi-day greenfield festivals, held in non-urban settings with on-site accommodation. Commercial greenfield music festivals, in this context are understood as large-scale, commercial outdoor music events held on undeveloped (or greenfield) sites, where organizers build temporary infrastructure to host live performances, camping, and audience amenities for the duration of the event (see Anderton 2019). In India, these events attract participants from across the country, fostering a translocal ethos (see Chakravarty 2023). These events, aimed predominantly at a middle-class, cosmopolitan Indian youth, cultivate an emergent urban, globalised identity grounded in shared musical tastes and lifestyles. Unlike the global associations of dance music with raves and underground scenes, the Indian commercial scene is primarily centred on legal, heavily commercialised events resembling global festivals such as Tomorrowland and Electric Daisy Carnival, offering diverse electronic genres across multiple stages. Contemporary, urban, globalised and digitally active Indian youth navigate daily cultural negotiations, resulting in the formation of a dual cultural identity (see Chakravarty and Bennett 2023). EDMC acts as both a symbol of cosmopolitan aspiration and a site to navigate cultural tensions between globalised aesthetics and local socio-cultural constraints. Ultimately, this study reveals how contested interpretations of EDM impact cultural formation within India's urban youth context.

Given how the paramount focus of this article is to explore the cultural dynamics and social practices of Indian EDMC, the research presented relies on a combination of secondary and primary sources. Secondary sources provide a foundational understanding of the local history of dance music in India, shedding light on the processes of localisation and festivalisation shaping its evolution in India. Complementing this, primary data drawn from ethnographic fieldwork and interviews investigates two key aspects. First, the cultural

practices and performances that underpin participation and consumption of the culture in urban India. Second, the contemporary meanings, perceptions and applications of the terms EDM and EDMC within this demographic. Together, these approaches provide a comprehensive sociological analysis of the culture in India.

SEMANTIC FLUX: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMING

I use “semantic flux” to refer to the ongoing, multi-directional processes through which the signifiers EDM, rave, trance and related labels are continually reinterpreted, contested and repurposed by different social actors within the context of India. The conceptualisation of semantic flux, as applied in this article, draws on Bourdieu’s (1989) description of how social worlds are structured as symbolic systems wherein meaning is not fixed but exhibits indeterminacy, vagueness and elasticity, along with variation over time. This idea of a semantic elasticity allowing meanings to shift and vary is substantiated by Hall’s (1980) note on the processual, contested nature of meaning in communication.

As cultural phenomena evolve, the language used to describe them is itself subject to continuous renegotiation, producing a symbolic/semantic struggle (see Bourdieu 1989). Semantic struggles—through critique and discourse—can be central for social transformation. At a foundational level, semantic change arises from both cultural innovations—such as new technologies—and from intrinsic linguistic processes like subjectification (see Hamilton et al. 2016).¹ Linguistic scholarship further shows how social factors—ideological shifts, community practices and institutional pressures—direct semantic evolution (see Amato et al. 2018; Amaral 2021).

Within popular music cultures, this dynamic is particularly pronounced. As musical styles evolve, new terms and labels enter the cultural ecosystem that either assimilate into or disrupt existing stylistic norms. This is evident in Silver et al’s analysis of 3 million Myspace musician profiles, showing how genre categories are mutable (2016). Genres thus operate as dynamic systems, wherein their semantic contours shift alongside broader cultural transitions. Bennett’s (2008) study further emphasises that meanings attributed to popular music are neither fixed nor solely determined by structural factors such as class or race; instead, they emerge through reflexive, localised processes of interpretation. Van Venrooij (2015) traced the semantic emergence of 12 EDM genres in the UK, illustrating how new subgenres and their attendant vocabularies crystallise within social networks, only to be reconfigured as scenes globalise. Similarly, Ferreira and Rabot (2017) highlight persistent ambiguities in EDM discourse: terms like rave, electronic and dance music variously overlap or diverge as the genre shifts from underground subculture to mainstream culture. These terminological negotiations reflect broader semantic flux, driven by globalisation, commercialisation and evolving audience practices. Semantic flux is thus not a peripheral by-product of cultural evolution but an integral process of evolving and transitioning socio-cultural practices. Drawing on these sociological perspectives, I employ semantic flux to capture the shifting meaning around both the term EDM and the associated cultural performances by Indian EDMC members.

EDM CULTURE(S) IN INDIA: GOA TRANCE STUDIES

By the late 1960s, Goa had become emblematic in Western understanding as a site of authentic spirituality, its appeal fuelled by dance-music tourism drawing Goa Freaks to its northern beaches in search of hallucinogens and hedonism (Saldanha 2006; St. John 2012). In the early 1970s, Goa Freaks hosted full-moon beach parties at Christmas and New Year at Anjuna, Baga, Calangute and Vagator (see fig. 1), practices that continued into the 1980s, featuring cannabis use, nude bathing and listening to live and/or recorded psychedelic rock. Goa trance emerged in Goa when DJs such as Laurent, Fred Disko, Swiss Rudi, Stefano and Gil collaborated with acidheads, experimenting with looping musical fragments on magnetic tape (St John 2011; Mothersole 2012). Although goa trance achieved global prominence, the scene within Goa declined in the early 2000s owing to regulatory restrictions and increased domestic tourism (D'Andrea 2004; Saldanha 2010).



FIGURE 1. MAP OF INDIA WITH GOA, SHOWING THE DISTRICTS, CITIES AND MAIN BEACHES OF THE GOAN REGION. IMAGE SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS (GNU FREE DOCUMENTATION LICENSE).

Existing dance music scholarship focuses largely on goa trance rather than trance in Goa and/or India. In St John's works (2010, 2011 and 2012), for example, goa trance is situated as a crucible of ritualised counterculture. Goa trance emerged as a neo-spiritual experience wherein sound systems, light shows and embedded rituals produce collective trance states that spread from Anjuna to festivals worldwide. Scholarly focus foregrounding Goa-based forms of the genre becomes more directly pertinent to the history of EDM in India discussed in this article.

Through ethnographic accounts of Anjuna's full-moon parties, Saldanha demonstrated how "white counterculture" (2007: 69) in Goa, was sustained by colonial logics. In his analyses of goa trance gatherings, Saldanha (2002b, 2006 and 2010) shows how embodied musical scenes produced dynamic, non-subjective orderings of corporeal difference, materialised through dance, proximity and refrains. Far from dissolving racial boundaries, psychedelic trance often intensified them, revealing the limits of a purportedly inclusive rave culture. In other words, the Goa Freaks hardly ever danced or partied with the Goa locals.² Deploying the concept of "viscosity", Saldanha (2007: 49) illustrates how race was enacted through corporeality within shared trance spaces, explicating how goa trance's utopian ethos reproduced stark racial segregation between Western tourists and local Indians. Goa villagers and locals were present at the site but usually in the role of tea stall and souvenir shop vendors and rarely shared the dance floor with Goa Freaks. Corporeality in Goa's psytrance parties was thus sorted and segmented along race, class and tourist-local lines (Saldanha 2006).

While Saldanha argues how psytrance had paradoxically thickened rather than transcended racial segregation in Goa, D'Andrea (2009) disagrees with this hypothesis, and instead puts forth a two-fold counterargument. First, psytrance insiders tend to reject tourists—irrespective of race—thus claiming the Goa observations were not racially informed. Second, spatial segregation between insiders and outsiders forms a basic feature of electronic dance scenes around the world, and Goa was no different, for its members regularly attend other scenes interlinked across global countercultural circuits.

D'Andrea provides ethnographic evidence of ongoing party networks and scene adaptations through the 2000s to highlight insider claims that the goa psytrance "scene ain't the same" (2010: 40); complaints about over-commercialisation; poorer music/drug quality and increased state surveillance. While these observations lay bare the shifting political-economic conditions that determined how the scene operated, D'Andrea also argues that discourses of collapse obscure the scene's resilience. He employs a transnational lens and instead argues that Goa's psytrance network evolved under such circumstances and did not simply wither. However, in his other work (see D'Andrea 2007), he also demonstrates how the once-fluid, grassroots psytrance community in Goa has been reframed by commercialisation, festival branding and rising ticket costs, leading long-term participants to perceive a loss of authenticity and to experience new economic barriers to entry.

EDMCs IN INDIA: THE LOCALISED EVOLUTION

The evolution of EDMC in India demands a broader, more nuanced account than the existing dance-music scholarship provides. While contemporary Indian EDMC often gets traced back to goa trance, that narrative underplays the decisive roles of local artists, scenes and cultural participants across the subcontinent (see Faiza et al. 2010). Spanning five decades, the history of electronic music in India—from the 1970s to the 2020s—reveals a complex interplay of global influences and local innovations.

Bollywood—the mainstream Indian film industry based in Mumbai—serves as a primary hub of national film production. Traditionally, Bollywood integrates music, songs and dance as integral tools of cinematic storytelling, allowing Bollywood to exert hegemonic control over India's popular music landscape (Manuel 1991; Dwyer 2014). Unsurprisingly, several of the earliest and most influential electronic experiments in India (1970s-1990s) emerged from within this industrial ecosystem. Musicians like R.D. Burman, Kesri Lord, Bappi Lahiri, Charanjit Singh, Ilaiyaraaja and the Pakistani sibling duo Nazia and Zoheb Hassan challenged and transgressed established traditional music norms in the country, incorporating emerging electronic technologies and international influences both within and outside of Bollywood.

R.D. Burman revolutionised Bollywood with electronic elements, blending rock, jazz and traditional music. Kesri Lord introduced the Minimoog synthesiser, contributing to Burman's innovative soundtracks in Bollywood projects they collaborated on (Sarrazin 2019; Booth 2022). Charanjit Singh's *Ten Ragas to a Disco Beat* (1982) predated acid house by four years, blending Indian ragas with disco beats (Aitken 2011; Kreps 2015). Bappi Lahiri's disco-infused Bollywood soundtracks in the early 1980s popularised synthesised music and the disco-based sounds (Majumdar 2022). Despite these advancements, however, electronica remained overshadowed by Bollywood and confined to Goa's rave culture until urban clubs and festivals emerged post-2000, fostering India's EDM community (Faiza et al. 2010).

The 1990s were pivotal: India's 1991 New Economic Policy (NEP) liberalised the economy—reshaping labour markets, consumption and especially broadcasting—and thereby opened mass exposure to global popular culture (Zuberi 2002). This period marked middle-class households gaining access to satellite television, thus exposing the urban youth to global popular music cultures through MTV and Channel [V] (Juluri 2003). Increasing gentrification and urbanisation of major Indian cities also led to the rise of India's new middle class and the formation of a globally oriented, English-educated youth (Saldanha 2002a; Ganguly-Scrase 2009). This generation of globalised youth began forming a bicultural identity, torn between local traditions and global pop-cultural influences (Saldanha 2002a; Chakravarty and Bennett 2023).

Simultaneously, two major shifts occurred in Indian popular music. Bollywood films, reflecting socio-economic changes, saw the rise of innovative composers like A.R. Rahman, blending traditional and modern music (Beaster-Jones 2017). At the same time, Indipop—an independent, commercially oriented popular music scene—emerged, producing stars like

Daler Mehndi and Alisha Chinai who appealed to youth with hybrid aesthetics (Sarrazin 2019). The Indipop scene also gave rise to a remix music culture, where DJs reimagined Bollywood classics with contemporary electronic sonic sensibilities (Beaster-Jones 2009). Although the Indipop scene and the remix era were short-lived due to Bollywood's hegemony and cultural capital, the late 1990s and early 2000s scene established the DJ as a central figure in India's music scene, fostering cultural hybridity through remixed Hindi film songs (Beaster-Jones 2009; Faiza 2010).

The changing music and lifestyle patterns among the urban, middle-class youth also led to an increase in the presence and number of pubs, clubs, lounges and cafés in major urban areas (Saldanha 2002a). Urbanisation and the increasing disposable income of the middle class further fuelled the growth of clubbing culture (Grover 2018). These spaces became crucial sites for the globalised youth to enact the hybridity in their identities and enact their experiential modernities (Saldanha 2002a). However, as Bollywood absorbed Indipop's most successful artists and pubs and clubs remained limited to select urban pockets, there remained a dearth of an easily accessible cultural arena for the youth to perform their changing identity and lifestyle. This void began to be addressed from 2007, with the launch of the country's first and currently largest EDM festival, Sunburn, Goa (Faiza et al. 2010). Following the success of Sunburn, several other similar large-scale, commercial, annual EDM festivals emerged, like Magnetic Fields, EVC and Supersonic, contributing to the burgeoning popularity of EDM festivals in the 2010s and 2020s (Daga 2023). These festivals catered to the evolving identity of urban, globalised Indian youth, seeking new forms of cultural expression.

INDIAN EDMC SCENE MEMBERS

In India, official definitions—such as those outlined in the National Youth Policy of the Government of India (2019)—classify youth as individuals aged 15–34, representing approximately 27.5% of the national population. However, this study focuses on a more specific subgroup: contemporary, urban, middle-class Indian youth.

This demographic is uniquely shaped by socio-economic and cultural transformations following India's economic liberalisation in the 1990s. The introduction of satellite music television channels during this period significantly influenced their cultural sensibilities. Furthermore, this cohort emerged as early adopters of digital technologies in the 2000s, a trend intensified by the State's Digital India initiative launched in 2015 (Kaka et al. 2019). These developments alongside increasing internet access and the proliferation of social media platforms, have profoundly affected how urban youth interact, consume and express themselves. The rise of pubs, clubs and electronic dance music (EDM) festivals has also been pivotal in shaping contemporary urban youth culture. Events like Sunburn, launched in 2007, have provided spaces for young people to articulate and experiment with evolving identities. These sociocultural shifts reflect broader late-modern consumerist tendencies and globalised influences, which inform the distinctiveness of urban youth cultures in 21st-century India.

Commercial forms of contemporary EDMC in India among urban Indian youth are the aftermath of and have been deeply informed by these late-modern globalised tendencies. Present-day EDMC in the country operates on a pan-Indian scale, and almost every major city hosts multiple EDM events throughout the year, with annual festivals being the most sought-after experiences by the EDMC youth (Chakravarty 2023; Chakravarty and Bennett 2023). Thus, these individuals belong to the new Indian middle class, defined by their globalised outlook, digital literacy, English-medium education and socio-economic privilege. The research underpinning this study focuses on individuals actively engaged in India's translocal EDMC scene. This community forms around shared practices, interests and lifestyles associated with EDM, offering a lens through which to explore the intersections of globalised modernity, digital culture and youth identity. As such, this demographic exemplifies how urban Indian youth navigate the complexities of contemporary consumerism and cultural hybridity, positioning themselves within broader sociocultural dynamics in late-modern India.



FIGURE 2. EDMC FESTIVAL PARTICIPATION AND MEMBERSHIP IN AN INDIAN COMMERCIAL EDM FESTIVAL.
PHOTO CREDIT: HARI, 2022 (USED WITH PERMISSION).

To understand the Indian urban EDMC youth and their cultural performances, it is essential to address two key aspects of the semantic flux within EDM and EDMC. First, it is necessary to examine how these terms have been historically deployed, utilised and interpreted to

make social and academic sense of dance music communities, from their inception to their evolution, revealing the localised development of EDM in India. Second, investigating how contemporary community members perceive the terms EDM and EDMC and the diverse meaning-making processes informing their EDMC-related performances. Such an exploration provides valuable insights into the motivations driving youth participation in this emerging music-centred urban culture in contemporary India.

ON THE SEMANTIC FLUX IN EDM TERMINOLOGY AND THE INDIAN CONTEXT

EDM serves as an overarching term encompassing diverse subgenres and styles, including house, techno, trance and drum and bass, among others. Two defining characteristics distinguish EDM from other musical genres. First, its production heavily depends on electronic technologies such as synthesizers, drum machines, sequencers and samplers. Second, EDM is inherently designed for dancing, typically in live performance settings. The genre is experienced in various contexts, including raves, dance parties, nightclubs and music festivals. Within dance music scholarship, EDM has been examined as a musical text, a cultural artefact and a youth cultural phenomenon (Mazierska et al. 2021).

Here, the term EDM is used to acknowledge its evolution, encompassing not only transformations in the music itself but also the cultural scenes that have emerged in its diverse and proliferating permutations. Early academic references to EDM are scarce. During the 1990s and early 2000s, terms such as “rave”, “dance” and “club culture(s)” were more prevalent in scholarly discourse (see Redhead 1993; Malbon 1999; Bennett 2001). However, in contemporary scholarship and journalism, EDM functions as a descriptive umbrella term for myriad electronic music genres that gained popularity after the late 1970s (see Butler 2012; Mazierska et al. 2021).

Jóri’s (2021) in-depth literature review of academic literature, journalistic accounts and online content from the discourse community from the 1980s till current times gives us a better understanding of how the term “EDM” is applied. Journalistic usage of “EDM” predates its adoption in academic writing, as evidenced in Reynolds’ characterisation of the term as a “profusion of scenes and subgenres” (1998: 9). In academic discourse, on the other hand, terms like rave, club culture and dance music were more common. Larkin defined rave as “a one-off gathering for late-night consumption of prerecorded dance music” (1994: 302), wherein the music is usually 125–140 bpm, dance-focused and produced for release on independent and non-commercial labels. Similarly, Thornton referred to British youth’s “dance music” as “discotheque or club music” (1995:114). Bennett, in theorising contemporary dance music scenes, noted that the 1990s club-based dance music scene introduced the sociological term of “club cultures” (2001: 125). By the late 1990s, increasing commercialisation of dance music cultures led to rave scenes merging with dance club scenes, forming a “rave-club culture continuum” (Anderson 2009: 21). The 2000s marked another shift, with multi-day commercial EDM festivals gaining prominence (Jóri 2021).

As outlined earlier, this article employs the term EDM to reflect its evolution, capturing a semantic flux reflecting shifts in both the music and the cultural landscapes surrounding it. The focus is on exploring emerging music scenes and youth cultures in India, centred on

EDM consumption and festival attendance. In the Indian urban context, EDM represents a broad spectrum of electronically produced subgenres, including house, techno, trance, psytrance and deep house, among others, often associated with DJ performances and EDM artists. Contemporary Indian EDM and its semantic usage can be understood culturally through the Indian urban youths' *in situ* performances, who form membership within the scene. EDM, for the urban Indian youth, similar to current global trends, is a broad term or a "super genre" (Parker 2014, p. 45). Musically, EDM in India is largely associated with DJ nights or performances by EDM artists. Unlike global EDM culture, which transitioned from underground to mainstream, the Indian EDM scene is predominantly commercial and legal. Multi-day, greenfield festivals are the pinnacle of the Indian EDM experience, typically held in regional settings, featuring on-site accommodation and attracting attendees nationwide. Such festivals epitomise translocality, a concept drawn from Brickell and Datta's geographical framework (2011), denoting simultaneous cultural exchange across diverse locales. Dowd et al. (2004) similarly connect translocality to music scenes, demonstrating how such festivals unite participants from dispersed local settings. In India, these commercial EDM festivals appeal primarily to middle-class, urbanised and globalised youth, whose shared musical tastes and lifestyles foster a collective translocal identity. Unlike underground raves, these events align with global commercialised festivals like Tomorrowland and Electric Daisy Carnival, showcasing multiple EDM genres across several stages in a highly structured, legal format.



FIGURE 3. SCENE FROM AN EDM FESTIVAL IN INDIA. PHOTO CREDIT: DEVPRIYA CHAKRAVARTY (2021).

INDIAN EDM IN CONTEXT: REFLECTING ON POLITICAL ECONOMIES

Both Saldanha and D'Andrea's political-economic analysis (discussed earlier) lends itself to the understanding of how contemporary forms of EDMC modalities in India operate. Emerging shifts in the political economy of popular musics in India were marked by the NEP of India 1991, as outlined in an earlier section. While not EDM-specific, Ganguly-Scrase's (2009) study of India's expanding middle classes under neoliberal reforms post 1991, lays crucial groundwork for understanding who the principal participants of contemporary mainstream Indian EDMC are, as well as how cultural capital and disposable income shape access to global music forms. This analysis is further expanded by Juluri's (2002) characterisation of India's late 1990s MTV Generation as the cohort of contemporary youth whose identities were shaped by music television, forming a transgenerational youth culture. In my earlier work on the contemporary EDMC scene in India (see Chakravarty 2023), I trace how since 2010 commercially organised festivals (Enchanted Valley Carnival, Sunburn, VH1 Supersonic, etc.) mediate urban–rural dynamics, pricing structures and sponsorship logics, effectively enabling access through participation to those with sufficient economic and social capital. It shows how festival economies both include and exclude Indian youth along class lines. Such observation echo D'Andrea's analysis of the commercialisation of the goa trance scene in early 2000s, wherein “global nomads” (2007: 1)—typically well-resourced expatriates—leverage their social and economic capital to shape Goa's rave spaces through VIP zoning, tourism infrastructures and curatorial influence, thereby entrenching class-based inclusion and exclusion and reframing local semantic understandings of trance culture. Similarly, large-scale, mainstream festivals shaping India's contemporary EDM scene, also bear class-based markers of leisure-based tourist activities. The difference is that the majority of current Indian EDMC participants have been translocal/transnational tourists. Such insights are foundational for understanding how economic politics—festival commercialisation, tourist consumption, spatial segregation and the privileges of insider elites—produce inclusion/exclusion dynamics and reshape the meanings (semantic flux) attributed to EDM in India.

Saldanha (2002a) explicated how popular music and its mediated forms like MTV shape a formative practice in Bangalore, through which an Indian metropolitan, upwardly mobile youth produce distinctive spatialities, social identities and modes of sociability. The growing demand for globalised cultural goods and the means (mobility, disposable income) to consume them has deeply informed the current form of EDMC membership in India.

Commercial EDM festivals in India predominantly attract urban, middle-class youth with global outlooks, whose common musical preferences and lifestyles contribute to the formation of a shared translocal identity. In contrast to underground raves, these gatherings mirror international, commercially driven events such as Tomorrowland and Electric Daisy Carnival, presenting a range of EDM genres across multiple stages within a highly regulated and formally organised framework. The most prominent form of EDMC membership is achieved through access to large-scale EDM festivals in the country. High-priced festival

tickets, travel expenses to greenfield festival sites and the leisure time required to attend annual events set a class barrier to entry, requiring economic capital as a prerequisite for membership. This is because these resources are largely confined to the urban middle-class demographic in India. Additionally, given that the Indian youth who tend to seek identity and community through EDMC participation are usually the youth that either formed the MTV generation of the country itself or gained access to global popular music through the ready availability of the internet. Being digitally enabled and ready access to global popular music, grants this section of youth a certain level of social and cultural capital.

While there continues to be a scarcity of ethnographically informed studies to illustrate this, my earlier studies (see Chakravarty 2023; Chakravarty and Bennett 2023) and observations made during my ethnographic fieldwork for this study, bring to light the continuation of class forming an unequivocal prerequisite for contemporary EDMC membership in India. Exclusionary political economies are expressed through the distinct roles played at the venues. It is usually the urban middle-class Indian youth who populate the dance floor and identify as EDMC members. Meanwhile, the on-site workforce, the working-class Indians, form the seasonal staff, security personnel and local labourers. Thus, even though contemporary Indian EDM festival sites bear a great potential for a certain section of the Indian youth to actively engage in acts of contesting cultural identity, the underlying class-based hierarchies still exist and operate, echoing Saldanha's corporeal differences present in goa trance gatherings of the 1970s-1990s in Goa (see 2002 and 2006).

INTERPRETATIONS OF EDM SEMANTICS IN INDIA: CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS AND PERFORMING BICULTURAL IDENTITIES

Through the processes of globalisation, individuals within their home country may encounter new cultural influences that facilitate the development of biculturalism—where two distinct cultural streams are embraced—and bicultural identities. This dual identification emerges from both direct and indirect cultural interactions (Meca et al. 2020). Such individuals often maintain strong ties to their local culture while simultaneously adopting a global identity aligned with broader, global cultural trends (Arnett 2005). West et al. (2017) identify three key processes through which bicultural individuals navigate their cultural contexts: integration, hybridisation and cultural frame switching. Integration involves merging one's cultural identities into a cohesive whole by reconciling conflicts and appreciating similarities between cultural systems. This process emphasises resolving tensions between cultural groups while fostering a harmonious coexistence of both identities. Hybridisation, in contrast, entails actively combining elements of two cultural streams to create a distinct, blended cultural identity. This process moves beyond reconciliation by generating a “third culture” (Useem 1971:14–15) that uniquely bridges the initial cultural systems. Cultural frame switching, the third process, involves the dynamic activation of cultural knowledge and behaviours in response to specific contextual or situational cues, such as cultural imagery (West et al. 2017; Meca et al. 2020). Each of these strategies highlights different ways bicultural individuals adapt to and negotiate their cultural environments.

The contemporary urban Indian youth's bicultural identity stems from the country's recent sociocultural currents, rapid globalisation and urbanisation, which have forged a fraction within the fabric of their identity. Growing up in middle-class and socio-economically privileged households meant that this cohort had early and easy access to global popular media, culture and music. Such exposures instilled within them a sense of Western-centric lifestyle aspirations, fostering a new sense of music culture. Emergent lifestyle aspirations of the youth were also continually and simultaneously surrounded by existing and ongoing traditional societal and cultural norms (see Chakravarty 2023; Chakravarty and Bennett 2023). This section of the Indian youth population also underwent another level of hybridity when it comes to their communicative language, wherein, their first language was often merged and combined with English, resulting in dual speaks like Hinglish (Hindi and English), Benglish (Bangla and English), Tamlish (Tamil and English) and so on. The self-reflections of research participants, illustrate how the nature of their bicultural identity reflects the lived experiences of the urban Indian youth alongside the interplay of globalised influences and traditional Indian values shaped by recent socio-economic and cultural transformations of their milieu:

When I talk to my friends and even peers, I hardly use just one language, you know? My mother tongue is Hindi, so I use like a mix and match of Hindi and English. It is how we grew up, yaar [man]. We grew up mixing English and our own language. Like, I never say thank you or welcome in my language.³

Everything is a combination of what we saw on TV and what we were told by my parents. From clothes to food to movies and music. My wardrobe is mostly fusion ethnic and western clothes and so is my Spotify playlist. I can't choose one or the other.⁴

I find it easier to use English words at times. My native language, Bangla, I feel, is harder than English... [laughs]...I don't know...maybe because I read things in English, watch English stuff and listen to music with English or Hindi lyrics, my Bangla vocabulary is very limited.⁵

The above statements reveal how globalisation, media and cultural heritage contribute to hybrid identities and practices, aligning with sociological frameworks on biculturalism and identity negotiation. Globalised, urban Indian youth's embodiment of a dual cultural alignment results in their identity being in a constant state of flux and liminality. They, therefore, tend to find themselves "betwixt and between" (Turner 1967) the two poles of cosmopolitan and traditional. Sid's use of a "mix and match" linguistic style, much like the other participants of this research, highlights a semantic hybridisation, a characteristic of bicultural adaptation. Such integrations of English into everyday communication reflect a functional and symbolic reconciliation of local and global cultural streams, aligning with Tadmor and Tetlock's (2006) concept of integration. This linguistic flexibility demonstrates how bicultural individuals negotiate cultural dualities to maintain social belonging. Pooja's

description of her “fusion” wardrobe and Spotify playlist, on the other hand, exemplifies hybridisation, where distinct cultural streams are actively combined to create a unique cultural expression (West et al. 2017). Her inability to “choose one or the other” underscores the internalisation of dual cultural influences, fostering a blended identity that transcends binary distinctions between local and global. These narratives collectively underscore how bicultural individuals actively integrate, hybridise and navigate cultural frames to construct fluid identities. They reveal the nuanced processes of cultural negotiation facilitated by globalisation, demonstrating the interplay between cultural heritage and global influences in shaping contemporary identities. When talking about how music, lifestyle and community choices for Maya and Tony were shaped based on their access to global forms of mediated cultures, themes of hybridity and integration become more apparent:

It was always interesting when my sister and I would be watching, say Taylor Swift music video on TV, and we would say, that is how we want to talk, dress, etc. As soon as we switched the TV off, we could hear *dadi* [grandmother] praying in the next room and playing *bhajan* [Hindu devotional music] on her phone. The two worlds were always kinda bumping like heads on.⁶

I remember the friendships I made in middle school, were based on pop music videos we liked on MTV, like Backstreet Boys or NSYNC, or sitcoms we watched like Friends or How I Met Your Mother. Because no-one at my home was into that stuff, and it was the same for the other kids.⁷

In Maya’s account and self-reflection of how the juxtaposition of Taylor Swift music videos and her grandmother’s devotional music took the form of a collision, symbolises the cultural tensions inherent in bicultural contexts. Tony’s experiences echo a similar form of negotiated identity, which in turn informed the collective bonds he fostered with his peers. This duality reflects Saldanha’s (2002) argument that cultural identities are shaped by ongoing negotiations between competing cultural streams.

It can be argued that, rather than expressing identities that are anchored elsewhere, consumption-based youth cultures are now the sites where identities are constructed (Hollands 1995). One of my respondents, Tia clarified that, “It is not a rave. Raves have different associations. These are commercial events, with security where drugs and even weed are illegal”.⁸ Marking a clear distinction between the Indian EDMC scene and raving, Tia further added: “But this is where everyone is, the crowd, the artists, and my friends. So, this is my kinda EDM”. Similar sentiments are echoed by another participant, Sid: “I like the commercial bits. They add a touch of Indian cheesiness too, like flags, some random Bollywood DJ mash-up. I like that combo. Makes it relatable. This is EDM, raving is the next level”. Such respondent accounts highlighting how commercial EDMC differs from an understanding of raving further reinforce the duality inherent in the member understanding of EDMC performances, positioning EDMC as a site that bridges mainstream and normative cultural consumption and experiential and dual bicultural. Elements of

localisations embedded within the EDMC practices in India, as noted in the form of “fusion” in respondent accounts above, make EDM more accessible to Indian audiences but also signify the creation of a unique cultural product that resonates with dual cultural affiliations. Themes of biculturality, hybridity and dualities are similarly reflected in the way the term “EDM” is deployed, employed and applied as well. The semantic flux aligns with their identity flux, thus making the meaning-making processes closer to an active act of seeking belongingness for the youth. Thus, participation in EDMC serves as a performative space where the Indian urban youth negotiate, contest and express their hybrid identities by engaging with a cultural site that equally embodies a liminal characteristic.



FIGURE 4. INDIAN EDM FESTIVAL SUNBURN, FEATURING THE INDIAN NATIONAL FLAG ON ITS MAIN STAGE DURING A BIG INTERNATIONAL ACT DEPICTING THE INHERENT DUALITIES PRESENT IN THE COUNTRY'S EDMC PERFORMANCES. PHOTO CREDIT: DEVPRIYA CHAKRAVARTY (2021).

NEGOTIATING SONIC SPACES: FESTIVALISATION AND TRANSLOCALITY OF INDIAN EDMC

Building on Bennett et al.'s (2014) concept of the festivalisation of culture—which emphasises the growing prominence and institutionalisation of festivals within contemporary cultural, social and economic contexts—Indian EDMC performances can be interpreted as an interaction between local and global cultures, communities, identities and lifestyle narratives, shaped and experienced through the festival framework.

Traditionally, festivals functioned as communal rituals that reinforced collective values and traditions. In the modern era, however, they have transformed into platforms for celebrating cultural identities, fostering community and expressing lifestyle practices, heavily influenced by globalisation and commodification. Such events often serve as sites of cultural consumption, offering economic benefits, promoting tourism and facilitating communal connections while navigating the intersection of local representation and global integration (Turner 1982; Gertz 1991). While contemporary festivals may retain elements of their traditional roles, they also cater to a broader range of purposes, particularly in articulating the cultural identities and lifestyle practices of participants (McKay 2000; Bennett 2004).

In a fragmented cultural landscape, festivals like Indian EDM events have adapted to the dynamics of cultural pluralism, mobility and globalisation, providing valuable perspectives on identity, community, locality and belonging. These festivals often strive to balance the dual aims of representing local identities and engaging with the broader forces of social transformation (Bennett and Woodward 2014). Consequently, modern festivals emerge as critical spaces for representing, integrating and exploring cultural diversity (Luckman 2014), particularly within the Indian EDMC context, where translocality is a significant sociological dimension. The concept of translocality is employed here to describe the interconnected network of local cultural sites. Annual commercial EDM festivals in India take place across the country and the Indian EDMC youth, despite being from dispersed locales, come together to attend these pan-Indian events based on shared taste in music and lifestyle. Thereby, contemporary EDM festivals in the country stand testament to an emerging urban translocal youth culture.

Localised patterns of festivalisation in Indian EDMC form a salient part of the Indian youth's cultural membership and performance. As evidenced in prior studies of mine (see Chakravarty 2023; Chakravarty and Bennett 2023), there emerges an Indian way of raving, wherein commercial EDM events are preferred as cultural sites over raving and these sites become apt avenues to transgress constricting normative expectations to form alternative collectives. The new communities built, although ephemeral in nature, mirroring the liminal festal scape, are formed based on shared crises in identity and a mutual need to seek new forms of belongingness. Several studies on EDMC have concentrated on the religious parallels found within the practice of raving, as well as the displaced religious experiences characteristic of trance scenes (Gauthier 2004). These works highlight both direct and

indirect regio-spiritual associations with specific dimensions of EDMC (see St John 2006). However, seeking spiritual or religious fulfilment is generally not part of Indian EDMC membership. Contemporary urban participants emphasise this distinction: Om claims that “This is India. Religion and Bollywood is everywhere. I like EDM festivals because it is like a break from that”.⁹ Another respondent, Rizul, reinstates this idea: “Religion, for me, is strict. It has too many rules around food, clothes, how you talk. There are no such rules at EDM festivals”.¹⁰ Demonstrated by their vignettes, it becomes apparent that performances within the contemporary Indian EDMC are based and conditioned on transcending the otherwise strictly and at times rigid religious traditions of the mainstream society that informs their everyday lives. This is further evidenced by Dia’s emphasis on attending EDM events as a personal choice, in contrast to her participation in religious events:

It doesn’t matter whether you are religious or not. You will end up going to religious festivals, ceremonies because the family will drag you there. Here, I come by choice. This is very different from spiritual and religious stuff and I like it that way.¹¹

Greenfield commercial EDM festivals in India act as sites wherein the participants challenge their everyday normative traditions and, in doing so, come together in an EDM-based communitas. Unlike traditional forms of music cultures in the country that are often either rooted in religious, regional, or cinematic contexts, EDM is valued for its ability to transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, offering a universal soundscape for its listeners. This stems from disenchantment with how Bollywood functions in Hindi despite the massive linguistic diversity in the country. EDM, on the other hand, being mostly a-lyrical, tends to be more translocal in nature, as highlighted by Shree:

It is almost funny how the biggest film and music industry in India is Bollywood. The movies and songs are in Hindi. People like me, who do not speak or understand Hindi, only have regional music for us. EDM is not about the language and so everyone in the country can enjoy EDM, no matter what language they speak.¹²

Shree’s statement is an example of how for urban Indian youth, EDM is more than just music; it is a medium through which they negotiate their cultural identities. As globalisation and digitisation continue to influence their lives, EDM offers a platform for a sense of collective self-expression and cultural experimentation. Participation in EDM events allows young people to explore facets of their identity that may not align with traditional expectations. The bicultural nature of urban Indian youth identity is a recurring theme in their engagement with EDMC. These individuals often find themselves caught between local traditions and global aspirations. While traditional values emphasise familial ties and societal identities, global influences advance an alternative cosmopolitan lifestyles and music choices. EDMC, with its emphasis on shared experiences of such biculturalities, provides a space where these dualities can coexist. Contemporary Indian local EDM artists like Ritviz and Nucleya mirror similar dualities in their sonic format, wherein they blend traditionally and culturally familiar sounds (from old Bollywood movies and/or iconic

instruments common in cultural festivities) with electronica to provide the members with a sound that resonates with the EDMC youth's own cultural anxieties, as illustrated by a number of research participants:

Nucleya's amazing, bro! Sounds I know, because they were all around me mixed with sounds I like and identify with. Have you heard his city bass soundtracks? So good. He picks up like iconic city-based ethnic sounds and made it into a hard-core techno bass thing! How good is that!¹³

I love how Ritviz blends classical beats with EDM beats. I relate to that stuff, because that fusion speaks to me! I am also same kind of fusion as a person.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

Evidenced by ethnographic findings presented in this article and previous work published elsewhere (see Chakravarty 2023; Chakravarty and Bennett 2023), it becomes apparent that within the Indian context, the cultural understanding and practices of EDMC, along with the insiders' perceptions of their own participation within it, are in a state of semantic and performative flux. This flux is liminal in nature and informed by the bicultural nature of their identity. To form a sociological understanding of the complex nature of cultural identity and expressions through their EDMC activities in India, it is necessary to first build a comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural and political-economical history, capturing the semantic flux around EDM in India, first. Thus, this article has aimed to present a historical perspective to the contemporary youth sociologies in urban India in and around EDMC.

Contemporary forms of Indian EDMC exemplify the inherent cultural tensions in the urban youth's bicultural identity formation. It simultaneously absorbs globalised influences while embedding unique means of localisation, such as the fusion of Bollywood and regional sounds with electronic music. These processes generate spaces where cultural hybridity thrives and the Indian EDMC youth re-negotiate their sense of belongingness and the dualities within their cultural identity. Membership in EDMC offers a performative avenue for the urban Indian youth to contest and transcend traditional societal constraints. Festival sites become spaces of experiential hybridity where young people express their shifting individual and collective identities through music, lifestyle and social cohesion. Unlike traditional cultural events tied to religion or region, EDM offers a translocal format that allows the members to overcome traditional linguistic, sub-ethnic and cultural barriers, fostering a new and alternative sense of community. This inclusivity, however, is shaped by socio-economic privilege, reinforcing the association of EDMC with the globalised, middle-class elite.

While rooted in global EDMC trajectories, the Indian context demonstrates significant divergences. The commercialisation and legal framework surrounding Indian EDMC contrast sharply with the underground origins of rave culture in the West. Similarly, the

cultural products emerging from this scene reflect Indian realities—such as the integration of folk and classical elements into electronic music by artists like Nucleya and Ritviz—creating a sonic representation of hybrid identities. The semantic fluidity surrounding terms like EDM and EDMC further illustrates how urban Indian youth adapt global concepts to their local realities. This redefinition is mirrored in their linguistic hybridity, as they navigate everyday communication with multilingual fluency, blending English with regional languages. Such practices reflect broader processes of cultural integration, hybridisation and frame-switching, essential strategies for negotiating the complexities of bicultural life. Ultimately, Indian EDMC operates as both a site of cultural resistance and accommodation, offering its participants a break from traditional societal expectations while simultaneously fostering new forms of belonging. These spaces emphasise the liminality of youth identity in contemporary India, situated between the polarities of cosmopolitan aspirations and traditional values. By situating Indian EDMC within broader sociological frameworks of globalisation, consumerism and youth culture, it becomes evident that this phenomenon is not merely a cultural import but a locally negotiated and distinctly Indian articulation of global modernity.

NOTES

- 1 A process wherein linguistic expressions articulate meanings conveying the speaker's perspective (Hamilton et al., 2016).
- 2 Saldanha (2006) labels hippie tourists from the UK, US and Western Europe "Goa Freaks", while D'Andrea calls the local population "Goa Villagers" (2016).
- 3 Sid interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 16 November 2021.
- 4 Pooja interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 27 May 2022.
- 5 Rishi interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 12 December 2021.
- 6 Maya interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 9 January 2022.
- 7 Tony interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 2 February 2022.
- 8 Tia interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 11 May 2022.
- 9 Om interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 15 November 2021.
- 10 Rizul interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 27 December 2021.
- 11 Dia interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 3 April 2022.
- 12 Shree interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 25 March 2022.
- 13 Hari interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 18 February 2022.
- 14 Maya interview with the author (on Microsoft Teams), 9 January 2022.

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