Celebrating life and longings Bollywood dancing in Amsterdam

One of the most vigorous and exciting arenas for linguistic change and innovation is within immigrant communities, and the 160,000-strong Surinamese-Hindustani community in the Netherlands is positioned within a multilingual Europe, a continent still coming to terms with the racial tensions inherent in a multilingual population with cultural pluralism. Dipika Mukherjee has studied the women of this community and shares her findings with regard to language maintenance and loss and also the obstacles they face as they try to define their identity and their place in the Indian diaspora.

Dipika Mukherjee

IT IS PAST SEVEN IN THE EVENING in a community centre in Amsterdam. Cars are jammed into the tiny parking lot; some are double-parked. Inside, a female singer is belting out loud raunchy lyrics through a CD:

Na gilaf, na lihaf, thandi hawa bhi khilaf sasurree!...
No blanket, no quilt, the freezing wind is a bitch!...

Bidi Jalaile Jigar Se Piya, Jigar Maa Badi Aag Hain...
Light your cigarette with my heart, beloved, I'm on fire...

The song, titled *Bidi Jalaile*, is from the Bollywood movie *Omkara* (2006). This rustic, suggestive song featured as an 'item-number' in Bollywood parlance, which means that the dance was very sexy. The 14 women in the room are writhing to the beat; most are mouthing the lyrics. The movie was filmed in a dialect of Hindi similar to the language that the Surinamese-Hindustanis speak.

I am observing these women, as well as participating in the class as the singularly most untalented member. How the language identities evolve for women in the Surinamese-Hindustani community, and how their roles play out in the larger Dutch society has been the focus of my sociolinguistic research, but my primary question for this study is: Is the participation in a Bollywood dance class (and the consequent exposure to Hindi) indicative of a re-alignment with their Indian roots?

Background
In recent years, sociolinguistic studies have focused on the study of language as a political and economic entity. The findings have been highly nuanced when immigrant groups are the focus of the study. Researchers have investigated language choice as an expression of anti-racism (Rampton 1995), as covert subversion of the dominant language (Mukherjee 2003; Gal 1994) or as resistance to a dominant social code (Mukherjee & David, 2007; Mukherjee 2006; Miller 2004).

The Surinamese-Hindustani community in the Netherlands is among the Indian Diaspora of 'twice-migrants'. Most are descended from indentured labour recruited to work in Suriname.

The first ship, the *Lalla Rookh*, arrived in Paramaribo on 5th June, 1873, after a three month voyage from Calcutta, carrying 452 labourers, mostly recruited from the Uttar Pradesh area and Bihar. Prior to the independence of Suriname from the Netherlands in 1975, and driven by the threat of the same kind of ethnic violence that characterised the independence of other Caribbean nations, many of the Surinamese-Hindustanis migrated to the Netherlands. In June 2008, the community celebrated 135 years of their immigration history with cultural shows and scholarly speeches in The Hague, much of it celebrating the fact that the children of labourers were now a model minority in their new homeland.

Interest in Bollywood in the Netherlands is well documented (Choenni, 2006; Verstappen & Rutten, 2007). Bollywood movies (*Silsila, Hum Tum* among others) have been shot in the Netherlands, a tulip was named after the reigning queen of Bollywood Aishwarya Rai, and the International Indian Film Academy (IIFA) awards in 2005 were held in the Netherlands. There are at least 12 different Bollywood dance institutes scattered all over the country and there is even a new Bollywood Casting Agency based in Eindhoven for people with Bollywood dreams.

There is also a growing interest by mainstream Dutch audiences; the dance instructor mentioned a growing demand for the shows he choreographed for the Holland Casino and the classes at the Kunst Akademie, attended by non-Indian students. He explained:

"Bollywood is about international music. The new songs totally use international music. I think that you need a wide background and you need to learn a lot for this... Sometimes there is flamenco dance, flamenco music, salsa, merengue, even belly dancing..."

I closely observed 22 women enrolled in a single Bollywood dance class held at Daalwijkdreef (in Amsterdam) over a period of 16 months (January 2007 to April 2008). The women did not all consistently participate; some dropped out (especially after the summer break) while others joined midway. The class met every Wednesday for an hour (6-7 in the evening) and the women ranged in age from late 20's to late 40's.

The women enrolled in this class had friends or relatives who took lessons in Bollywood dancing. Few came alone. This dance class seemed to foster a sense of community rather than any sense of personal benefit, and there were no 'divas' in this class, unlike the teenager's class which met an hour earlier and was teasingly titled the *Little Angels*.

Religion did not come up until I interviewed the participants individually, and then I discovered that this class had Muslim, Hindu and Christian women from the Surinamese-Hindustani community.

Hindi vs other Indian languages/dialects
At least four languages are spoken in the daily lives of the members of the Surinamese-Hindustani community in the Netherlands: Sarnami Hindi, Dutch, Standard Hindi and Sranan Tongo. Sarnami Hindi is the main language of communication within the Hindustani community and within Hindustani families (Avoird, 2001).

However, Dutch was clearly the language of communication in this class. During a recording made during a class, there was some singing along in Hindi, as well as the instructor's encouraging *Kya Baat Hai!* (Good job!), but the language of instruction was Dutch. Codemixing, although present, was rare. Here is one recorded example (the Hindi words are in italics, the Dutch in bold):

Instructor:	*Anitaji aap thora...***snel trein**
	(Anita (polite form) you're a bit like...a fast train)
S:	**Snel trein?**
	(Fast train?)
Instructor:	*Ha, aap* **stop trein** *banaye zara usko*
	(Yes, please make it a slow train)
S:	*Thik hai!*
	(All right!)

All the participants either expressed a strong desire to improve Hindi or to continue speaking their 'own language'. Although there was a basic understanding of standard Hindi among all participants in the Bollywood Dance class, the fluency varied.

Above:
Posters and websites advertising night clubs with Indian music themed nights. Photographs from Madan's Mega Bollywood Dance Show 2008, Hoofddorp. All photographs courtesy of the author.

in the old plays archived in Sarnami House; low class people (prostitutes etc), speak Sarnami, comic parts are also in Sarnami, but the main characters speak in Hindi. It was also interesting to note that night clubs with Indian themed nights were advertised as 'Hindi Nation' and 'Hindi Freakz'.

Longing and belonging: images of home

In this age of global deracination, a sense of belonging can be completely unrelated to any essentialist notion of geophysical space. The women in this community spoke of a sense of feeling Hindustani, but it had no connection with India as a nation. During the interviews with the participants, home was never India; India was associated with poverty, and being 'crowdy':
My husband, his wish is to go to India, uhm, when we were married he suggest to go with honeymoon, and uhm, I don't know why, but India is not attractive to me. Not yet. Not yet.

Home is sometimes not the Netherlands either; place of birth as well as age at migration is a strong predictor of attitude. The younger the person was at the age of migration, the stronger the ties with the Netherlands. However, the women in my study came to the Netherlands as teenagers or adults and frequently self-identified as 'Hindustani' over the other possible categories 'Dutch' or 'Indian'.

For some, Suriname is as wonderful as the ideal 'home' shown in the Bollywood movies:
Its really nice...you can see in the movies, in Indian movies, someone is going to get married all the food and that...before, in Suriname, it was like all that, the flowers...all the family, they do it, all together.

Suriname was presented as a community idyll in many of the stories I heard. One spoke of a mother-in-law's recovery from a deadly disease once she returned to Suriname and another told me her story of the community celebrating the Muslim tradition of *Qurbani* as one family, no matter how large. There was both regret and loss in these stories.

Life and death

The Surinamese-Hindustani women in the Netherlands are also conflicted by their own sense of who they are and what they can become, especially when faced with the contradictory forces of living within the very liberal cities of this country. There are many areas in which the women's aspirations and self-image do not mesh with that expected by the Surinamese-Hindustani community. This has made the community prone to a very high suicide rate, with women between the ages of 15-24 being at the highest risk. The local government in The Hague has initiated a project in an attempt to address the problems of these women who grow up in two cultures.

The problem is not minor. The statistics for attempted suicides per year, per 1000 girls in The Hague is given below. (source: Epidemiologisch Bulletin 1998, jrg 33, nr4, and 2005, jrg 40, nr 4.)

Suicides in The Hague, per annum, per 1000 girls							
	Dutch		Surinamese		Turkish		Moroccan
Period/Age	15-19	20-24	15-19	20-24	15-19	20-24	15-19	20-24
1987-1993	2	2.5	7.2	6.7	5.2	3.7	4.1	1.4
2002-2003	2	2.5	4.7	4.5	5.1	7.2	2.3	2

There were similar findings in a Singaporean study on Indian women and suicide (Mehta 1990). In Mehta's study, she looked at a low income group: patients in government hospitals who were predominantly Hindu, and she concluded that the age range between 15-39 was the most stressful period in the lives of the immigrant women, be they first, second or third generation.

The conflicts that the women face start with societal norms on how females are valued and the emphasis placed on chastity and marriage. The following extract is from an unmarried independent career woman, yet she emphasises her mother's chastity and sacrifice in glowing terms:
She had a shop, my father had a shop, like in Suriname you call it a market. Clothes. And she never got married, and she never had a boyfriend and she was young. And that's why, we have something like that's my mother. We need to have respect for her, she did... she gave up her life, just for her 6 daughters so that's why.

The status of men versus women can significantly differ in this society (Niekerk 1999). There was evidence of this from my data:
Hindustanis there is racism... even in our community, if you are dark oh no, they don't want you for their son, they want a chand ka tukra (a piece of the moon).

There is also the taboo of exogamous marriage and many constraints on women's movements. The pressures on women

can be more oppressive than on their brothers, leading to despair. The women I interviewed all agreed that there was a problem with suicides in the community:
Once, I was very sad, I was very very sad. I know how these people are, I know that and also my Phua, (aunt) who's working with [suicidal women... she also. And if every single speaker the situation they are in... It's a, the important thing is that the women, they start to learn that they are worth it... I did everything to be out of the situation and to realise what I have... and for what I am and the quality I have and not because I'm married or who's sister, daughter, but who I am.

Some conclusions

It is abundantly clear from this study that despite the hype of Bollywood that is currently prevalent in the Netherlands, there is no desire among the participants I studied to reclaim India as a country. They do not feel the need to re-align with India as a geopolitical entity, but the notion of 'Hindustani-ness' is very dear to them. This notion of Hindustani-ness includes language maintenance, both for transmission to their children and for communication with the elderly of the community. Although the sense of identity is not tied to any specific geographical place, the women studied have a strong sense of self that is distinctive from being only Indian or only Dutch. Although Suriname is perceived as 'home', they realise that there is no going back. There is a strong sense of fellowship within the Surinamese-Hindustani community and respect for its norms.

Although adherence to such a collective group can devalue individual women – leading to depression and despair – these women are the survivors. There is something to be learnt from a sorority such as this, with its sense of sisterhood and solidarity that crosses religious and cultural barriers. Bollywood may merely be the most accessible means for language retention of a familiar tongue; what is most important is that this group is constantly creating its own ways of speaking and thereby redefining their place in the Indian diaspora.

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Interestingly, there was some confusion about the nomenclature of the language used; participants were unwilling to label it as Hindi, Bhojpuri, Sarnami or anything else; most chose to call the language 'our Hindi'.

The desire to speak Hindi or an ethnic language was in order to communicate with the elders in the community, to transmit the language to the children, or to participate in *Baithakgana* (a community question-answer song tradition) and other community cultural events. The easy availability of Indian (Hindi) channels on TV had made it easier for these women to keep in touch with Hindi shows, but music programmes like *Saregamapa* (a Hindi song competition, like the 'American Idol' shows) seemed to be more popular than soap operas.

Women as language bearers is a well established tradition in sociolinguistic research. Researchers have established that men and women differ in their communicative style (Gal, 1994) and that women tend to use language in ways that adhere more rigidly to the standard language for their region while men often lead linguistic change away from – and often in resistance to – the 'standard' language (Mukherjee 2006). Recent studies have also focused on young women's, emergence as leaders of linguistic change (Miller, 2004).

In this community, the women were insistent about the need to teach their children their own language:
Also my Hindi for my children...I'm proud to be a Hindustani and I want them also proud to be a Hindustani, also in Netherlands, I want them to live here and also invite peoples, don't forget their own culture and their own traditions. When I'm I'm walking in Holland, I'm on the street, I'm looking at an old Indian woman, uhm, ask me something, I'm so proud I can talk to her in also in Hindi.

Hindi was widely regarded as having a status much higher than Sarnami in this community. Standard Hindi is used during religious ceremonies and is regarded more highly than Sarnami Hindi by Hindustanis (Avoird 2001: 29). Researchers in the field decried that Sarnami magazines were decreasing in popularity, as is the written literature. Most interestingly, a community leader explained that Sarnami's relative low status can be seen

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