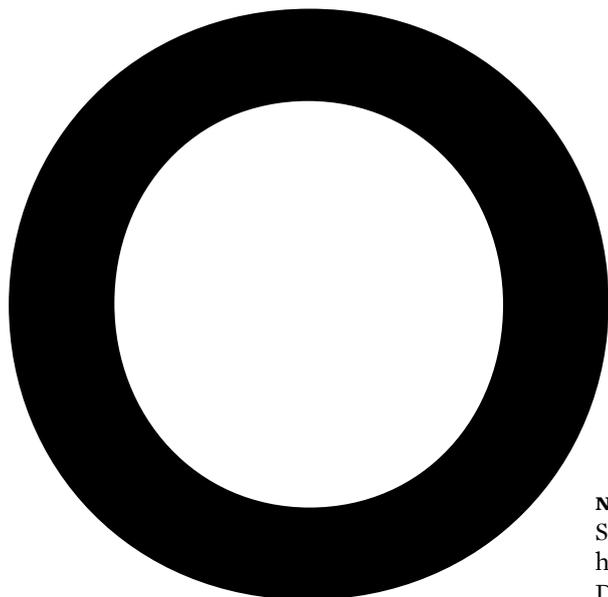


**JAMAICA  
VIA  
NEW DELHI**



**N A SULTRY NIGHT** in late September, scores of party hunters descend upon New Delhi's latest live music

venue in the self-consciously hip enclave of Hauz Khas Village. Inside, where the air is hash-sweet and the lights are low, a hundred or so sweaty bodies—bopping heads, flapping wrists—grind to the music. A familiar track comes on and the crowd responds with an appropriate level of enthusiasm.

*“Let me see your hands in the air and make some fucking noise! Make some noise for your DJs!”*

And the crowd does, thumping and jerking with even more vigour.

Up front are the Reggae Rajahs, who call themselves “India’s first reggae sound system”. Manning the decks is DJ MoCity, and rapping—or “toasting” as it’s called in reggaespeak—their own lyrics to the music are Diggy Dang and Mr Herbalist.

*“Hear it pon your left, hear it pon your right / Reggae music sound so nice.”*

A few years ago this scene would have been unthinkable: Although Bob Marley & The Wailers, and Marley separately, were popular in India as far back as the 1970s—and a sizable number still cares for the genre individually—the alternative (non-Bollywood) club and concert circuit has been dominated by rock and electronica for years, boasting countless artists and aficionados. Early on, Reggae Rajahs’ gigs would see about 30 friends, and maybe 10 to 15 reggaeheads. But now, a crowd like the one that came out that late September night represents somewhat of a victory to the Rajahs. From a support base of virtually nothing, they have managed to stir up a local interest in reggae as well as its subgenres of roots, ragga, dub and dancehall in under three years. While it is still to permeate the mainstream consciousness, reggae music has most definitely arrived.

THE WINDS OF REGGAE ARE  
BLOWING IN INDIA

**AARTI BETIGERI //**



BIPLAB MUZIBAR RAHAMAN FOR THE CARAVAN

It was a Bob Marley tribute night at The Love Hotel in South Delhi on the eve of the reggae legend's birthday that convinced Mohammed Abood that reggae was ripe for the picking in India. Quite fortuitously he ran into an old footballing friend, Zorawar 'The Herbalist' Shukla, and Raghav 'Diggy' Dang, a guitarist from London. Together, late in the night, they traded ideas, and the following day India's first reggae act was born. The date was 6 February 2009—had Bob Marley not died from cancer in 1981, he would have turned 64.

Initially the collective was briefly known as Reggae India, the same name as a Facebook group Abood had set up the previous year to connect reggae fans from across the country. It April 2009, the group officially became Reggae Rajahs—actually, a rather clever name: 'Jah' is a Rastafari term, meaning God.

Abood, 24, is an Iraqi, born in Baghdad to a pilot father, and has lived in Delhi since he was a teenager. His performance name is DJ MoCity. As with all members of the Rajahs, DJing is only a part-time venture for Abood; the rest

**Together, late in the night, they traded ideas, and the following day India's first reggae act was born. The date was 6 February 2009—had Bob Marley not died from cancer in 1981, he would have turned 64.**

**BELOW:** Making up Reggae Rajahs are (left to right) Raghav 'Diggy' Dang, Zorawar 'The Herbalist' Shukla and Mohammed 'DJ MoCity' Abood. **FACING PAGE:** (LEFT) The Ska Vengers, a ska band based in Delhi; (RIGHT) Super Cat, whose father was of Indian descent, was an influential dancehall DJ in Jamaica in the late 1980s and early 1990s.



COURTESY TIME OUT DELHI

SHANNON MIKHAIL LOBO FOR THE CARAVAN



of the time he works as a promoter, an MC, an events manager, and occasionally dabbles in street art.

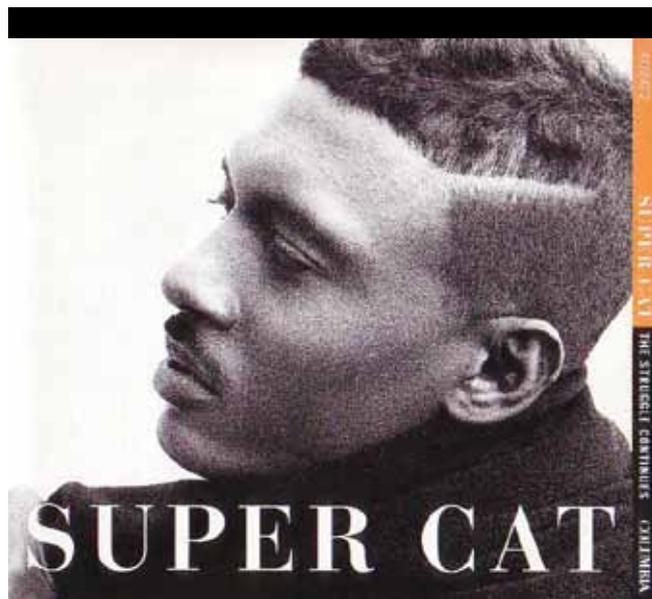
Abood's embrace of reggae occurred during a 2002 trip to Goa, where he bought a homemade mixtape off the beach for ₹100. It is hard to remember a time when the world of music wasn't available at your fingertips, online; but this was less than a decade ago.

It was the first Abood heard Bob Marley. "We played it over and over," he recalls.

"I'd never heard music like this. He wasn't just talking about girls and money." Abood had been raised on a musical diet of mainstream tunes, "bling-bling music without a message", as he describes it. "This [reggae] was stuff that made you think." He didn't become a reggaehead immediately, though. It was a slow process of conversion. Now, Abood sports long dreadlocks and looks exactly as a reggae DJ selector should.

Reggae Rajahs are a sound system: a concept built around a group of DJs, sound engineers and MCs that first emerged in 1950s-era Kingston, Jamaica, as the sounds of ska were starting to foment in the bars and streets of the city. A sound system typically plays the music of others while adding its own flavour. Meanwhile, the selector (sometimes called *selektah*, in line with proper Jamaican patois) *selects* which tracks are to be played. Sounds systems have been a vital part of Jamaica's musical evolution, and have even become politically active. Often strongly linked with particular political parties, the DJs in a sound system would occasionally riff on political issues. "And if you go through the history of the music you'll find that every issue that the politicians, or the social environment at the time, would fail to address, you could pick up a record and you could hear in detail what it was all about. So all the social issues were addressed in the dancehall," said American musician Bobby Vicious in the book *Dub: Soundscapes & Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae* by Michael E Veal.

Now, sound systems around the world attract enormous,



cult-like followings. Abood tells me of a crew in Japan called the Mighty Crown Sound System that regularly plays in stadiums to audiences of 30,000-40,000. "And that's in Japan, man!" he exclaims, impressed by the enthusiastic following of a Jamaican musical form in a culture that is vastly different. "Hopefully in ten years' time we can create that kind of scene, that buzz."

We've met in a cafe in Hauz Khas Village, fast emerging as a ground zero for Delhi hipsters, with a growing roster of independent boutiques and cafes springing up in the narrow lanes of the urban village. Nearby are two of the Rajahs' favourite venues: The Living Room (TLR), where the plan to form the group was hatched, and Out of the Box, which has a Swiss chalet theme inside, with lots of timber log ends and rope. Slick and earthy at the same time, it's one of just a handful of venues to properly understand the value of making the most of a good view. Unusually for a Delhi bar, smoking is allowed inside. The day after Out of the Box opened its doors, in the middle of this year, my Facebook timeline was full of gushing comments tempered with concern over its firetrap potential. In October, the bar suffered extensive damage when a fire broke out inside, apparently started by an errant Diwali firecracker.

"In the early stages we spent more time as promoters than musicians. We would do flyers rather than rehearse. We knew it was important to build our own brand," says Abood of the challenges. From the early days of playing at venues scattered around Delhi, they quickly became fixtures on the festival calendar: the Holi Cow Festival in Delhi, the Escape Festival near Nainital and the Sunburn Festival, the four-year-old celebration of electronic dance music held in Goa. "We're the only non-electronic act at Sunburn," says Abood, with quiet pride. They travel interstate regularly, and sometimes internationally—Shukla has played with collectives in New York and Peru.

It might be easy to be the kings of reggae when you are the only ones doing it, but the Rajahs have plans. As part of



Apache Indian performs at WOMAD (World of Music, Arts and Dance) festival in Singapore in 2005. From Mali to Australia, from Israel to Cuba, artists from more than 12 countries performed at the festival.

LUIS ENRIQUE ASCUI / REUTERS

their push to cultivate a reggae consciousness here, the Rajahs are busy organising and promoting their own events. They have held two Christmas Jamdowns, a Bob Marley tribute event running over three nights and gigs with live bands. They recently launched a weekly night performance at TLR that sees them playing tunes and screening films to a chilled out, midweek audience of mostly diners.

They are also looking to record their own tracks, with a serious focus on socially conscious music. “We want to be from the grassroots, be organic. We want to lay the foundation,” says Abood. Down the line there are also plans to set up a dedicated reggae festival. Already, they are planning to bring bands and DJs from around India to TLR. “We want to keep everyone close. We’re all growing together, there’s no competition.” There are individuals elsewhere in India who are budding reggae DJs, “one in Hyderabad, one in Mumbai”.

Most notably, however, there is The Ska Vengers, a ska band based in Delhi that has seen its popularity skyrocket this year. Raghav Dang is, along with his Rajahs commitments, a founding member of the Ska Vengers. Dang, 28, is a self-taught guitarist and, in stark contrast to Mohammed Abood with his long dreadlocks, has the clean-cut looks of a banker, with cropped hair and glasses. In fact, he had once worked as a researcher for a London hedge fund.

Dang joins Abood and I at the café straight from his day job at a marketing firm, clad in a T-shirt and shorts and with a messenger bag slung across his body. For a while, we talk about Goldman Sachs. Dang, who has a smile as wide as a crescent moon, gets animated and starts punching the air with his fist as he discusses the global financial meltdown and its root causes. When it came to a choice between dealing with the aftermath in London or the possibility of playing guitar in various sunny locations, there

was no contest. Dang packed up and moved to India in 2009 for a life change. Right now he’s living in the basement of his father’s house in South Delhi, a spot that has become an impromptu jamming location for the Rajahs and their friends.

Dang had played with reggae bands and worked as a session musician in London, and in 2009 posted a message on the Reggae India Facebook page, keen to get involved with any nascent reggae scene here. He too realised the potential for reggae in India at the Marley tribute night.

“There was a crowd. There were people vibing to reggae music,” says Dang. “There was a scene waiting to happen.”

His involvement with The Ska Vengers also came about via the Facebook group. The nine-member outfit is fronted by Miss Samara C, a singer, actor and TV presenter, and includes Delhi Sultanate, or Taru Dalmia, who is known for his socially conscious rap with drum ‘n’ bass team BASS-Foundation and collaborations with Dalit icon Bant Singh .

Their songs are politically charged and activist in nature and go well with the capital’s cultural ambience. Last May, as Arundhati Roy read from her new book *Broken Republic* at the India Habitat Centre’s packed amphitheater, The Ska Vengers played in the background. She had noticed the group the previous month when they performed at the Free Binayak Sen Campaign at the Alliance Francaise. The group debuted only last year, but already enjoys a prominent presence. Recently a foreign embassy tried to book the Ska Vengers for a show, but balked at their hefty fee. The links between the two outfits are strong. On 12 January this year, the Rajahs took to the decks at the preview of Ska Venger’s debut album at TLR. In building a scene, there is a clear understanding that one needs to stay close to those doing similar things.

**There are also a couple of Indian-influenced riddims: one is called Diwali, the other Bollywood, both dating back to around nine years ago. But nothing more modern than that: perhaps, as reggae sounds pick up in India, new riddims will emerge.**

Ska and reggae are from the same musical family. First came ska, which originated in Jamaica in the late 1950s and quickly became a favourite with the mod subculture of the day. Combining elements of traditional Caribbean folk styles, mento and calypso, with American jazz and R&B, it is fast and upbeat, and often features brass sections alongside guitars, keyboard and drums.

By the mid-1960s came rocksteady, the music most closely associated with Jamaican rude boy culture. Rocksteady developed out of ska, and went on to evolve into reggae; with mellower vocals and slower beats, it too would often replace the horn section in ska with a strong electric bass line or other brass instruments.

This strong bassline is also a major feature of reggae. It is slower than ska, and its lyrics are often socially conscious or political in nature, as they were in the early days of ska. They are almost always spoken in a Jamaican Creole, with English and other European language words bent out of shape: while the words are familiar, the vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar and syntax are not.

To round out this primer on the music evolution of Jamaica: there is also dancehall, which features ‘toasting’ over the music, and reggae subgenres, of which dub, ragamuffin and hip-hop are the best known. In the latter, the instruments are mostly electronic.

Linking all of these is the *riddim*, the bass and drum baseline of any song. Different effects can be added on top, such as keyboard, lyrics or toasting, and a basic riddim can be reversioned. A riddim is the essence of a musician’s own style, rap and singing. Riddim ensures that all Jamaican-origin numbers ever composed and performed are connected to ‘de family’ of Jamaican music, which forms what is probably the world’s most complex musical kinship pattern. One of the next steps for the Rajahs’ is to create its very own riddim, and get different artists to voice their versions. That way, they’ll be able to get their sound out there where other sound systems and DJs pick it up.

It is a surprise that more reggae singers and DJs have not incorporated Indian rhythms and melodies into their music; after all, Jamaica has a significant population of ethnic Indians, most of who trace their antecedents to indentured labour brought to the West Indies in the second half of the 19th century. It is rumoured that it was these Indians who introduced marijuana to Jamaica and that the popular dish of curry goat has its origins in the Indian

community. One of the most influential reggae DJs was Super Cat, who rose to fame in the 1980s. Born in Kingston to a Jamaican father of Indian descent, William ‘Super Cat’ Maragh hinted at his roots in his unique style of music. “All reggae artists today are influenced by him, even Damian Marley,” Abood says of the three-time Grammy-winning reggae singer who is the youngest of Bob Marley’s seven sons.

As for fully-fledged Indian reggae stars, though, there really hasn’t been one since UK-born Apache Indian (born Steven Kapur) swung his dreadlocks in the early 1980s, pioneering in 1990 the bhangramuffin style—a mix of bhangra and ragamuffin—in such memorable tracks as ‘Chok There’ and ‘Boom Shak-A-Lak’.

There are also a couple of India-influenced riddims: one is called Diwali, the other Bollywood. But nothing in the past decade: perhaps, as reggae sounds pick up in India, new riddims will emerge.

In early November I head back to Hauz Khas Village, this time to TLR for the first of the weekly nights the Rajahs are hosting and promoting for the venue. I meet the final third of the troika, Zorawar Shukla. The night’s gig is slated for 8 pm, but it takes another hour to get going, and there is no sign yet of Dang or Abood. Shukla is alone sitting hunched over a laptop and squinting in the low light as he lines up tracks on a playlist before spinning around to reposition a speaker. As well as creating a reggae playlist they’re screening a documentary on the history of reggae, although the film’s audio is drowned out by the music. Still, they have a good turnout. The few tables not taken have been marked reserved, while a number of hipsters attending the show are standing at the bar, downing beers.

“I didn’t really know much about reggae before starting this up,” Shukla confesses. At 26, he was only a few months out of a university in Boston, where he had been studying communications, on that Marley tribute night. He is also an emerging filmmaker, and is collecting funds for his first documentary effort, which will be based in Manipur.

“It’s very conscious music, it’s not just meaningless dance music,” says Shukla. “It’s real, the words really matter.”

Eventually Dang turns up, and apologises. He had to go to the airport to collect his father, who had returned from a trip to Kabul. The conversation turns to whether the Rajahs might ever consider expanding into neighbouring countries, like Afghanistan.

Dang looks energised by the thought. “We *should* do something there, you know,” he says.

Shukla laughs doubtfully. “What, reggae?”

“No, not reggae, something else,” muses Dang. “There’s a youth scene, there must be young people like us who want to do something and not just sit around the house.”

Ultimately, this is what the Rajahs have done: found a niche that very few had realised existed, filled it, expanded it to give the public even more. For all of their street cred and musical savoir faire, they are first and foremost sharp operators, opportunity-literate like thousands of other savvy businesspeople who offer up goods and services to an Indian market that didn’t even know it wanted them yet. ■