# Can Anyone Dance to this Music?: A Study of Toronto's *Bhangra* Scene

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*Bhangra* is the music of South Asian youth raised in the West; it draws on the Punjabi folk genre whose name it shares, on the songs of popular Hindi movies, and on mainstream Western dance musics such as reggae, hip hop, house, and jungle. At the same time, *Bhangra* continues to exist as a folk music in the context of rural, agricultural Punjab, where songs are performed and danced to by men to the accompaniment of the *dholak* and/or *dholki* drums. In this setting, *bhangra* is primarily associated with the harvest festival of Bhaisakhi, and secondarily with weddings, the New Year, and other celebrations.

It appears that many diverse kinds of music are called *bhangra*, and it is difficult to find unifying characteristics in them. People within the South Asian community are divided about what constitutes a *bhangra* song, and the music itself changes as rapidly as any other commercial dance genre. Given the significance of *bhangra* to South Asian youth culture in the West it seems important to attempt to understand its content as well as its producers and consumers. It is the aim of this paper to promote a familiarity with *bhangra*, based on research carried out in Toronto in the spring of 1995.

## The "third culture" of *bhangra*

Before examining the music of South Asian youth in Toronto, it is useful to establish terms. Perhaps the most important is "third culture", introduced by sociologists John and Ruth Useem in 1967. The Useems defined third culture as "the cultural patterns created, learned and shared by the members of different societies who are personally involved in relating their societies, or sections thereof, to each other" (Useem and Useem 1967: 131). This definition is amplified by David Winter in his study of American professors living in Pakistan: "the term third culture introduced by John and Ruth Useem refers to those who operate within more than one society at the same time" (Winter, cited in Malik 1989: 6).

Winter and the Useems prepared sociological studies of groups of adults who, for reasons relating to their work, had left their own cultural settings to transplant themselves elsewhere. Both studies refer to Americans in the Indian Sub-Continent in the late 1960s. Since then, the adults who were the subjects of study have produced a generation raised in the third culture. These children are loosely referred to as "third culture kids"; they have inherited the

cultural values and expectations of their (usually) North American parents but have had little or no first-hand contact with their societies of origin. In common parlance, third culture kids are generally assumed to be Western (i.e., European or North American) children raised in Asia, who in many cases identify more strongly with the dominant culture of the countries in which they were raised.

Although the definitions offered by the Useems and Winter are not culturally or racially specific, there seems to be no precedent for applying this model to describe Asians raised in the West, although these young people exist in a comparable third culture. Their parents came to the West, but continued to promote the values and standards of the societies they had left behind while instilling in their children the cultural codes of a world they were not able to experience first hand. These children have existed simultaneously in modern Western society and in the expatriate communities created by their immigrant parents where they have also encountered the cultures of other immigrants. Just as Western children raised in the East felt set apart from the Asian children they grew up with, and also felt alienated from their Western peers at "home", so Asian children raised in the West have tended to feel out of place in both spheres of their existence.

It is therefore necessary to divest the terms third culture and third culture kids of their associations with Westerners living abroad to make these more inclusive terms. It can be argued that any child of immigrants creates a third culture in her/his patterns of interaction with others of the same and other backgrounds. Such is certainly the case with the Canadian-raised South Asians who are central to this study.

The passing down of traditional musics and dances is a powerful agent in the preservation of a culture; this is especially true in immigrant communities. In fact, traditions are often invented as a means of creating solidarity. In the face of mainstream Western society, South Asian immigrants to Canada have been compelled to band together as a single community in spite of their diverse cultural and religious affiliations. In this way, it is possible for a Canadian-raised Malayalee child to dance to Punjabi music and learn the words to Hindi songs from Bombay movies, and buy recordings of popular non-Asian music. This blending of resources derived from family, friends and mainstream popular culture (which in turn may be made up of elements from many cultural sources) establishes the codes of the third culture. The development of this kind of "cultural collage" is commonly described as a process

of "acculturation", but I prefer to use the less problematic "transculturation" to refer to the creation of a new social system that represents more than the sum of its parts.[1] While it is interesting to trace the origins of style characteristics in a music, the "hybrid" is a new species with its own set of meanings.

Popular music is often associated with urbanization and industrialization, largely on the basis of its dissemination by the mass media through technological channels. It can be further qualified as "entertainment music" as distinct from music associated with ritual. Paul Oliver (1990: 10) maintains that

> a popular music may well develop from a folk idiom as it gains a wider audience through personal contact, transmission by travel or by the media. It is widely believed that while a popular genre has a massive following it should retain its contact with its folk roots. These origins, real or presumed, represent the "authentic" in a popular music, recognised by the audiences in the vocal timbre or playing techniques of per-formers, or in the content or form of the songs.

It will become clear that it is precisely in this category of popular music that *bhangra* belongs. Many apparently disparate musics are called *bhangra* by their adherents, who identify either rhythmic patterns, instrumentation, singing techniques, subject matter in the lyrics, or a combination of these elements as "authentic" *bhangra.* Furthermore, one of the most interesting features of the music is the fact that it continues to exist simultaneously in the sphere of popular music and folk music, and exhibits different characteristics of style, instrumentation and meaning depending on its context. *Bhangra* played by DJs at daytime dances in suburban Toronto clearly has roots in the traditional folk music that continues to be part of Punjabi harvest festivals, weddings, and coming-of-age celebrations, but differences between the two musics can be discerned by any listener. In this way, the new *bhangra* exhibits many of the characteristics of the third culture kids who listen to it. While the word *bhangra* can be used to describe either or both of these musics, it is not uncommon to distinguish between "traditional *bhangra*" and "*bhangra* fusion". For the

purposes of this investigation, however, the term *bhangra* will describe only the Western-influenced youth music, while "traditional *bhangra*" will imply the rural Punjabi tradition.

A hybrid music is similar to a third culture in that it always represents more than the sum of its parts. For the past ten years in Britain,[2] and for the past four or five in Toronto, *bhangra* has evolved into a music that is the voice of third culture teenagers. Monika Deol, probably the most prominent South Asian media personality in Canada, has said that "anyone can dance to this music, but to the South Asian young people it really is a way to remind them of who they are" (Monika Deol, *Morningside*, CBC Radio, January 17, 1995).

## *Bhangra* in transition

In its incarnation as a folk music in a village context, one of the distinguishing features of *bhangra* is the type of drums used. *dholak* (or *dhol*) and *dholki* are related double-headed drums. The largest is *dholak*, a wooden barrel drum with a shoulder strap. The left head is played with a hook-shaped stick and produces a deep resonance, while the right head is hit either with two small sticks or one stick that is split at the end, for a tinnier sound. The *dholak* player is traditionally the leader of a *bhangra* ensemble and may walk around while playing. The *dholki* is a similar drum on a smaller scale; it is played with the hand. The drums adhere, for the most part, to a simple pattern of four beats, with the first beat receiving the most stress; while this pattern is common, particularly in the more traditional Punjabi songs, it is not universal. However, the loping short-long cell contained within each beat is prevalent in almost all *bhangra* rhythms, and interest and variety often stem from the way this groove is decorated. The *bhangra* sound is also characterised by the use of the *thumbi*, a one-stringed fiddle which is plucked to produce a rhythmic ostinato that coincides with the *dholak*.

Most *bhangra* songs, traditional and otherwise, maintain a call-and-response pattern, and can involve two or more singers. Singers occupy a prominent position. Also, all singers, players, and dancers will usually punctuate the sung text with shouts of "hoi hoi". This percussive refrain can occur on or off the main beats. The songs are invariably strophic, and have texts concerned with village life.

Traditional *bhangra* is male music. According to most of the informants for this study, women perform a music called *ghidda* on the occasions when *bhangra* is performed; this music is identical to *bhangra* except that no drums are used, and rhythm is provided instead by hand-clapping. Interestingly, a male informant differentiated between traditional *bhangra* and *ghidda* only on the basis of drumming and hand-clapping, making no mention of

gender roles. In another conversation, he told me that distinctions between *bhangra* and *ghidda* depend on who dances, not on who is playing the music, and that men and women alike perform traditional *bhangra*, though only men dance to it.

This explanation contradicts other sources on traditional *bhangra* and *ghidda*, and indicates that guidelines and formulas are perhaps not as rigid as they might appear. It might also account for the blurring of gender roles in songs like "Mera Laung Gewacha", a traditional *bhangra* song that is sung by men and women. The title of the song means "I have lost my nose-ring" (though subtler and more risqué meanings are possible), and the text is a narrative by a woman who asks listeners to help her find it. In the first verse, she describes how she went to the fields to take a meal to her beloved, and might have lost her nosering there; subsequent verses list other places in the village she had been.

"Mera Laung Gewacha" is very popular in both traditional and modern *bhangra* settings, and is often performed by male singers in spite of its obvious associations with women's experiences. One popular recording by *bhangra* superstar Bally Sagoo features a woman singing the traditional text in a style remniscent of Bombay playback singers such as Lata Mangeshkar, whose vocal idiom has set the standard for all Indian popular singing; male commentary on the woman's narrative is provided in English in the growling timbre and dialect usually associated with reggae music and "toasting". Another recording, by Toronto's Manni Rebel, joined by Vineeta, reverses the roles so that the story is sung in Punjabi by a male voice in the traditional style while a female voice comments in English in a West Indian dialect. This kind of experimentation and re-contextualisation of traditional values reflects the way South Asian youth in Toronto sift through all the resources available to them in the creation of the third culture.

Traditional Punjabi songs like "Mera Laung Gewacha" are popular in expatriate Punjabi communities in the West where they are played at family functions and community celebrations. The passing down of traditional songs and dances is an essential part of perpetuating a sense of cultural identity. Songs describing village life enable South Asian teenagers who have spent their whole lives in Canada, never seeing the village where their

elders learned to perform traditional dances, to feel a sense of their Punjabi heritage through the way their bodies respond to certain musics. One such informant describes this phenomenon:

> The music would be played, on special occasions and holidays, and you learn to dance from a very early age. As a very young girl I danced at family parties...then later, a lot of the songs that we danced to at day dances were remixes of Punjabi folksongs, so there was a lot of talk about the homeland and the old life.

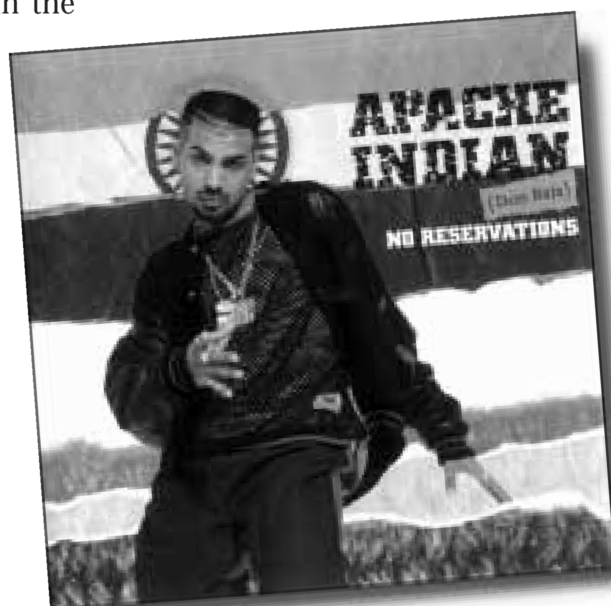
Learning the movements at the same time as learning to walk and talk, then earning praise from her elders for the correct performance of the gestures, served to make this type of response to traditional musics a source of pride; it also heightened the awareness of her connection to her elders and her community. Being able to move in the same way when surrounded by her peers in a nightclub also allowed her to express her heritage outside the safe confines of a family event.

In his 1989 work *How Societies Remember*, Paul Connerton devoted a chapter to discussing how ideas of the past are perpetuated in modern-day societies through bodily practices. He pointed to the sitting postures adopted by different members of any given culture to explain the idea of incorporating practices; for example, most cultures dictate different sitting postures for men and women, and pass on the "correct" postures verbally and gesturally until they become automatic, although never consciously taught (Connerton 1989: 72-3). It is possible to observe the same phenomenon with the passing down of traditional dances and dance musics from generation to generation (although in this instance the transmission is the result of a conscious effort to teach cultural rituals and not the automatic transmission involved in the teaching of correct postures). Through the performance of traditional dance gestures, generations isolated from the geographical source of their culture learn to feel a sense of cultural identity.

## The new music

The *bhangra* danced to by teenagers shares elements with traditional *bhangra*, but is not identical to it. A great deal of this music is created by remix DJs who might use the vocal line of a traditional Punjabi song with samples from popular dance music to create a new sound. This music is distinctively South Asian, but at the same time it is also comparable to mainstream Western dance music, an extremely important feature to the members of the third culture.

In the last five years, *bhangra* has begun to address issues and concerns that are of special importance to South Asian teenagers growing up in the West. Apache Indian, formerly a welder from Birmingham, is the first *bhangra* star to be signed to a major label (Virgin's *Island* label) and to access mainstream charts. He sings in English about issues like arranged marriage, the caste system, and the culture shock he experienced on a trip to India. These are the concerns of the third culture kids: teenagers growing up in India do not have to contend with these problems in the same way.




Although Apache's music contains many recognisable elements of traditional *bhangra*, such as the call and response form, the "hoi hoi" refrain, and the use of the *dholak* drum, he includes elements of mainstream dance music more than most *bhangra* artists, and sings — for the most part — in English. Interestingly enough, many people believe Apache to be West Indian, probably because of the prominent reggae element of his music. He habitually sings in the rasping timbres of reggae and raggamuffin music, and uses grammatical constructions more typical of Jamaica than of England's Midlands. Furthermore, he uses reggae rhythms and instruments as freely as *dholak* and *thumbi*; nevertheless, the subject matter of his music articulates the experience of growing up South Asian in Britain. His own biography (born Steven Kapur in the Jullundur district of Punjab and raised in a multi-racial area of Birmingham) is typical of members of the third culture. The England Kapur lives in is a West Indian-South Asian-English country; his affinity with reggae styles reflects his own tastes, shaped by growing up in the multicultural city that has produced mixed-race reggae bands like UB40.

One Toronto DJ saw Apache as a more positive role model for South Asian youth since he moves more towards the mainstream and away from traditional *bhangra*. He told me:

> If someone is too Indian, for some reason the kids can't look at him as a role model. It's hard to look at a group like Premi, they're old men in their thirties, with moustaches; how are you supposed to look at them as role models when they look like your uncles?

A similar sentiment was expressed by a promoter when I asked him about security at dances. Violence at *bhangra* events has been one of the most highly-publicised aspects of this music phenomenon, and security staff were always present at the door and on the floor. People coming into the dance were searched at the entrance, and Sikh youth were usually required to leave their *kara*[3] at the coatcheck. Security officers were invariably white males; in most cases, they were employed by the establishment hosting the event, and promoters had no involvement in the hiring process. When I asked why South Asian bouncers could not be employed at South Asian events, a *bhangra* promoter told me that it was easier for teenagers to respect the authority of strangers, and that security officers from within the community would inevitably have problems enforcing rules on their younger brothers, sisters, and cousins. The implications here are unclear; most informants interviewed for this study were unwilling to discuss violence and aggression at dances. This aspect of *bhangra*, and particularly the mainstream media's focus on it, is an area too complex to be satisfactorily addressed in this forum. I never encountereded any violence at a *bhangra* event, but rather heard about it second hand from bouncers, promoters, performers, and DJs.

Local DJs sell remix tapes based on their work at daytime dances. These "dayjams" take place in dance clubs in Toronto usually from noon to five on weekdays. The dances have to take place during the daytime so that teenagers can provide a plausible excuse for being out of the house (namely, that they are going to school). These events have caused controversy within the South Asian community, which is typically quite strict with its children, particularly the girls. Parents do not want their daughters wearing miniskirts and dancing with boys, but the hegemony of North American culture promotes this kind of activity as an essential part of growing up. For South Asian kids, remixes of village songs are familiar and reassuring at the same time that dancing in a club is liberating and exciting. The traditional dances and songs learned from elders at family functions and (usually) pushed aside in the effort to assimilate a dominant culture have resurfaced in an entirely new setting. Teenagers who have wrestled with the codes and practices of their parents' culture and the norms of Western youth culture have succeeded in combining the social and bodily practices of both in the creation of the *bhangra* music and dance scene.

One of the top *bhangra* DJs in Toronto stressed the need for originality in *bhangra* music. For this reason, he was unlikely to play traditional Punjabi songs at a gig, preferring instead to use the original work of performers like Apache, or Hindi songs from popular movies from Bombay. Although this music is arguably formulaic and derivative, the repertoire is constantly being replenished so there is always new material for remix DJs to work with.

## *Filmi* influences

The importance of Hindi movies to South Asian youth culture in general is enormous. Sabita Banerji, writing about *bhangra* in Britain in the 1980s, has said that "in India, the pop scene is the film scene" (Banerji 1988: 208). This continues to be true among South Asians in the West. Part of the research conducted for this study included a questionnaire which asked, among other things, about Hindi movies: 60% of almost fifty respondents said that they watch Hindi movies at home with their family and their friends, and this was split evenly among males and females. Girls do seem to watch the movies more frequently than boys, many watching one or more each week. It is difficult for outsiders to truly appreciate the prevalence of this music in Indian culture, both in India and in the Diaspora.

Even the most remote and rural areas of India cannot escape the lurid colours and glitter of posters advertising the films from Bombay, and songs from the latest movies are constantly played on the radio and television. The presence of Bombay film culture in the West is almost as strong; at a recent youth talent show sponsored by a South Asian club in Markham, Ontario, nine of eleven performances in the dance category were adaptations of routines from recent Bombay movies.

Film music is enormously important to South Asian girls, and to the formation of gender roles within the third culture. Most teenage girls in the community watch the movies with their parents, learn popular songs and dances by heart, and perform the dances at family and community events. This sort of performance is approved and encouraged as appropriate behaviour for young women; the girls learn to feel proud of this aspect of their cultural heritage and gender identity. Dancing with boys in nightclubs, on the other hand, is generally not considered acceptable behaviour for daughters, but often the same songs and dances are performed in both contexts. Girls at dayjams usually danced with other girls, and often performed routines perfectly while miming to a popular film song; hours of practicing in front of a mirror came to fruition when surrounded by close friends, oblivious to the boys watching just outside the circle.

The music from the Bombay film industry is popular with people all over India, and breaks down boundaries within immigrant communities outside India. Basing remixes on this music causes *bhangra* to be the music of all South Asian youth, and not just those with Punjabi parents. At the same time that the growing preference for movie songs can be seen as a move towards a more homogeneous *bhangra*, it is worth noting that traditional Punjabi music has been very influential in the development of this genre, according to Alison Arnold (1988) and Peter Manuel (1988). In an article about the importance of film culture to popular culture in India, Arnold discusses the impact of a Punjabi film score composer, O.P. Nayyar, who was enormously successful in Bombay during the 1950s and 1960s, and was largely responsible for setting the standard for movie songs that continues to be adhered to today.

Even if Bombay film music is static and derived in part from Punjabi folk music, it is perceived to be a more universal music; and so it breaks down barriers between South Asian immigrant youth from different communities. *Bhangra* music is now generally considered to be the music of anyone of Indian descent; Toronto teenagers originally from South India, the West Indies, and East Africa all attend *bhangra* events and identify with the music.

## Discussion: can anyone dance to this music?

The term third culture was never intended to apply to dance music or youth culture. Nevertheless, the Western-raised children of South Asian immigrants exhibit many of the characteristics of third culture kids. In much the same way, *bhangra* music, drawing on sources as diverse as traditional *bhangra* and mainstream dance music, ultimately fits into neither category, and must therefore be considered a third culture music. Through dancing, performing, and DJ-ing, young South Asians in the West are able to become spokespersons and role models for their peers. Even ten years ago, it would have been difficult for South Asian teens to find role models with which to identify; now in 1995 Monika Deol is a successful media personality known across Canada, a modern Western woman who has retained her South Asian identity and the respect of her community. Her presence on the air

is an acknowledgement on the part of the media of the fact that mainstream culture is no more, and that, as Paul Ricoeur wrote thirty years ago, "there are just others, that we ourselves are an 'other' among others." (cited in Jantjes 1993: 66).

In a discussion of the portraits of English families in India, Richard Leppert stated that the presence of musical instruments in these portraits symbolises harmony and a domesticity to be achieved only when the savagery of the natives had been tamed; in other words, that music is only possible when a foreign group has affirmed its presence in an alien culture (Leppert 1992: 94, 95). While it is impossible to equate the third culture created by the British in India with the third culture created by the Indians in Britain, because in both cases British culture was dominant, it is interesting to apply this theory to *bhangra*.

Certainly, the early waves of Indians immigrating to Britain in the 1950s were predominantly male, just as only Englishmen went to India in the early days of the Empire, and in both cases women and children were sent for only when a certain standard of living could realistically be expected for them. Solitary Indian men in Britain in the 1950s must certainly have listened to music, but music-making seems not to have occurred on a significant scale until the late 1960s, when the presence of women and children made South Asian community events possible. During this period, the music played at community events did not deviate noticeably from the music of "the homeland", and served to evoke feelings of nostalgia, thereby reinforcing South Asian "otherness" from British culture.

It was only with the coming of age of a generation of South Asians raised in Britain that new musical developments were able to take place. At the same time, this new generation of brown-skinned youth with English accents also served to confirm South Asian presence in Britain. In Canada, *bhangra* has evolved under similar conditions, capable of expanding only when its adherents have been in place long enough to be accepted as part of the larger cultural map. Without the presence of Monika Deol on "the Nation's Music Station" serving as a constant emblem of the Canadian South Asian community, it is doubtful whether *bhangra* musicians in Canada would have had the self-assurance to explore and experiment with the different musical elements of their experience.

Thus, Leppert's observations about the British ruling class in India can be seen to apply to a certain extent to South Asian communities in the West, as their members grow self-assured enough to venture into the mainstream world of dance music and youth culture. *bhangra* defies the carefully prepared and packaged youth culture devised by the white male hegemony of North America, and continues to address issues that are of specific interest to the South Asian community.

It seems that an incubation period is necessary before the music of an immigrant culture can move beyond its traditional boundaries. South Asian music in Britain and Canada needed time to assert itself as a means of evoking nostalgia and feelings of cultural pride in immigrants who found themselves adrift in a strange new world. As South Asians in the West gradually developed a sense of community, traditional *bhangra* also established itself, permitting Punjabis to re-enact the traditions of a far-away home. Pressures from the dominant Western culture obliged South Asian expatriate communities to forge a common culture; distinctions between musics of specific groups began to blur.

The generation raised in this culturally diverse environment found it easier to accept "foreign" cultural elements than did their parents. To them, Western popular music was as integral a part of their cultural makeup as the village dances and movie songs that served to reinforce their elders' collective identity. *Bhangra* music as it exists and evolves in Canadian youth culture today belongs to no one but the third culture kids who created it, and attests to the self-assured presence of a generation that is Canadian *and* South Asian, and whose members have no need to fit any cultural mould other than the one they have created themselves.

In view of the unprecedented success of Apache Indian, whose latest release *Make Way 4 The Indian* is more mainstream than ever, it might seem safe to conclude that *bhangra* is headed towards "cultural grey-out". It is tempting for scholars to shake their heads and sigh as a traditional music gains popularity and seems to lose its meaning, but it should be remembered that a new context leads to new meanings. *Bhangra* incorporates elements of the music its adherents associate with the "homeland" most of them have never seen into music that resembles mainstream Western dance music. The familiarity of music learned at family events affirms a sense of cultural identity at the same time that unsupervised dancing in a club reinforces a sense of generation identity. This generation includes South Asian youth whose parents belong to many different cultural groups, and not just those from Punjabi families. While it may be that traditional elements in *bhangra* music are on the wane, the music continues to serve the purpose of affirming a sense of pride in belonging to a new society of Canadian South Asians.

## Notes

1 Margaret Kartomi addresses problems inherent in the term "acculturation" in a 1981 article, where she observed that the term has been defined in so many, and often contradictory, ways that its meaning is vague and ambiguous. Furthermore, the term can emphasize the roots of a style at the expense of the new phenomenon itself.

2 For information on South Asian immigration to the West and the beginnings of the *bhangra* sound in Britain, see Banerji 1988, Baumann 1990, and Bidwell 1976.

3 *Kara, kunga, kesh, kachera, and kirpan* — bangle, comb, long hair, undergarment, and sword — are the five items traditionally carried by Sikhs at all times according to religious law. While this law is nowadays not stringently enforced, the wearing of the *kara* bangle is widespread. The bangle can be heavy, and has a sharp ridge; bouncers at *bhangra* events suggested that the *kara* can be used as a weapon.

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