

## *Introduction*

Music can often be the glue that binds after massive losses and deportations. For diasporic communities, music becomes a site for the negotiation of multiple consciousness or identities. It serves as a nexus of cross-reference that at once symbolizes the past (the homeland), the present (displacement), and the reappropriation of these in future, that is, reconstructing the past and the present in order to create meaning.

Music has a social value being a way of affirming personal identity, a form of communication and an expression and means of understanding lived experience (Simon Frith). In this way, music becomes a metaphor for articulating cultural identities.

In this essay, I would like to examine cultures of Indian youth in different sites of the Indian diaspora. As a blending of Indian musical instrumentation and western styles, bhangra music can be seen as a model of people in diaspora expressing their old and new cultures.

## Literary Review

In the words of Sharma, it is more useful to view the emergence of bhangra “*as an affirmative moment in the formation of an Asian identity discourse in the early 1980s, a site for Asian youth culture acquiring a sense of identity and visibility in the public domain, and negotiating an ambivalent positionality in relation to a culturally hostile and exclusionary British nation.*”

(Sharma, 1996: 39)

Reading bhangra as a diasporic text allows for a far more complicated understanding of diaspora, in that it *demands a radical reworking of the hierarchical relation between diaspora and the nation*. Bhangra, a transnational performance of culture and community, reveals the processes by which *multiple* diasporas intersect both with one another and with the national spaces that they are continuously negotiating and challenging.

(Gayatri Gopinath, writing for the journal *Diaspora* 1995)

*Bhangra* has been recreated as pan-Indian or pan-South Asian music and I think a lot of that has to do with the music. It’s very percussive, it has a really good beat and it really lends itself to being remixed as dance music. (Sunaina Maira, personal interview, Asia source 2002)

Virinder Kalra writes, “often bhangra is used as an excuse to repeat the worn-out pathology of “cultural conflict”, “intergenerational malaise”, and “caught between two cultures.”( Virinder Kalra, article from *desitunes*)

## *What is Bhangra?*

Simply and historically, bhangra is a traditional folk music from the region of Punjab, a lush valley situated between India and Pakistan, two countries in the subcontinental group now problematically generalised and termed 'South Asia'. Punjab is one of the most fertile regions in the area, and remains a place where bhangra is still commonly used in harvest celebrations, weddings, and religious festivals.

Most bhangra is sung in the Punjabi language, a Sanskrit-based cousin of Hindi and Urdu, which are the national languages of India and Pakistan respectively. Punjabi also serves as the official language of the Sikh religion. Brightly costumed dancers wearing turbans, as mandated by Sikhism, and loincloths, called lungis, continue to be the traditional image of bhangra.

## *Bhangra in the South Asian Diaspora.*

As the Punjabis were displaced, bhangra followed them around the world – first throughout the Commonwealth in the 'old' (exclusive) diaspora during the British Raj and the turn of the twentieth century, and then worldwide from the 1960s onward in what Vijay Mishra calls 'a new diaspora of late capital (diaspora of the border)', whose defining characteristic is mobility.

Amateur bhangra bands have been performing at weddings and other social occasions in Punjabi communities, such as that in London, since the 1960s, reproducing bhangra and creating new forms through improvisation.

Expanding beyond the Punjabi diaspora, bhangra has come to represent the 'South Asian' diaspora as a whole, since the constructed term 'South Asian' has been applied to all people with ethnic, religious, or cultural heritage emanating from anywhere in the south

Asian region – which includes the nations of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Afghanistan.

The ‘South Asians’ have spread from their homelands throughout the globe, establishing a presence in nations such as the United States, Britain, Australia, Canada, Fiji, Singapore, and Kenya, among many others. In each of these locations, new diasporic identities have been imagined and created. In each of these locations, bhangra plays in homes, at parties, in clubs, at charitable benefits, and at festivals.

Today, it is not only the hyphenated identities of the South Asian diaspora, but more importantly of their second- and third-generational offspring, who are reappropriating and creating the cultural forms into which bhangra has evolved. As these ‘new diasporic’ generations – who are not technically ‘displaced’ – struggle to ‘possess the hyphen’ of their identities, they carry bhangra in their blood; in their inherited diasporic longing for the sacred earth.

## *South Asian youth's rearticulation of culture through Bhangra.*

*"They are bicultural, but their biculturality is that they are not at home in either of the places."*- Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Just as Western children raised in the East feel set apart from the Asian children they grow up with, and also feel alienated from their Western peers at home, so do Asian children in the West tend to feel out of place in both spheres of existence. Bhangra music assumes an important role as South Asian immigrants strive to maintain their heritage in their new country.

Accordingly, 1<sup>st</sup> generation Indian immigrants are adamant their children grow up with 'Indian values' and an 'Indian culture'. While there is great variation and debate over what may constitute these values, Indian cuisine, religious practice, ethnic fashion and very importantly, now it is Bhangra that are the avenues chosen to cultivate 'Indian culture'.

Bhangra in its popular understanding is now a hybrid of borrowed musical traditions, just as third-culture South Asians create hybrid identities and borrow from multiple cultures, traditions, and nationalities in their creative expressions.

By creating hybrid forms in bhangra culture, Indian youth of the diaspora create space for themselves to live both as Indians and also as members of their home country; closing the gap between the cultures by juxtaposing them together. Most South Asians children also referred loosely as third-culture kids, have little first-hand contact with India, and depend on their parents's memories and upon cultural institutions such as film and music for knowledge of their culture of origin.

Many of the young adults and teens desire was to become assimilated into the mainstream culture even at the cost of rejecting their South Asian heritage. However, Bhangra music became an expression of what it meant to be a American/Canadian/British South Asian, and enabled these young people to feel a sense of pride in their cultural background. Music brought these third-culture kids back in touch with their roots.

Bhangra helps to affirm the third-culture South Asians' hybrid identities. As the lead singer of East London group Cobra states,

*"I can remember going to college discos a long time ago, when all you heard was Reggae, Reggae, Reggae. Asians were lost, they weren't accepted by whites, so they drifted into black culture, dressing like black, talking like them, and listening to Reggae. But Bhangra has given them their music and made them feel that they do have an identity. No matter if they are Gujaratis, Punjabis or whatever — Bhangra is Asian music for Asians."* (quoted in Sharma 1996: 35)

While participating in bhangra events, people can simultaneously be Indian, as well as American, or British, and so on. In bhangra events at New York nightclubs, women are dressed in typical club clothes, wearing a bindi, mehndi, and nose ring (traditional Indian decorations) dancing to bhangra using moves adapted from traditional folk dances (Maira 1999: 32). Transgressing all the boundaries between Indian and western cultures, Indian youth can perform their hybridity.

The diasporic youth may only be able to perform their hybrid identities in the nightclubs at bhangra events, but after they go home, the affirmation of those identities remain. By demonstrating that one can simultaneously identify with both India and their place of residence, bhangra affirms that Indian-American, or Indian-British, and Indian-Canadian identities can exist. Bhangra thus becomes a means of articulating their Indian-American/British/Canadian identity.

By creating a space uniquely suited to their situation, bhangra serves to affirm that their hybrid identities are valid, and they do not have to fit into white or black molds. Bhangra, therefore, creates a new way of being ethnically Indian, for youth in the diaspora.

## *Conclusion*

I feel that participating in the “bhangra culture” gives the third culture children an imagined voice with which to express themselves to their parents, non desi peers, mainstream American/British/Canadian culture and even India itself. I believe that most of these young people write India into their senses of self and collective identifications with India.

The music I have discussed, Bhangra, reflects a historical moment in which second-generation youth of South Asian descent living outside India have begun to participate in. Bhangra music is truly the hybrid of hybrids. The youngsters are trying to express themselves into a new world, with something separate from the Indian tradition but yet very much part of the Indian tradition.



## Appendix

Lyrics: ~~Kiwein mukhre ton nazran hatawan~~ by Rishi Rich

Yo, what i'm about to do is break it down  
Rishi Rich  
You ain't heard sound like this before  
Yeah sing it  
Dance....Ahan

Shake your ass  
From upclose

Kiwein mukhre ton nazran hatawan  
How can I take my eyes off your face

Nai tere jeya hore disda  
Can't see anyone like you

Kiwein mukhre ton nazran hatawan  
How can I take my eyes off your face

Nai tere jeya hore disda  
Can't see anyone like you

Jee karda mein tenu vekhi jawan  
The heart feels that I should keep on watching you

Nai tere jeya hore disda  
Can't see anyone like you

Tohiyo channa sukh mera, tuhiyo channa pyar veh  
Darling your are my peace, darling your are my love

Who's gonna make you dance  
Who's gonna make you move  
I like the beat  
Yeah  
To the beat..ahan

Tu mera mein teri hoi  
You became mine and I became yours

Jee karda mein tenu vekhi jawan  
The heart feels that I should keep on watching you

Rishi Rich

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