Bhangra in the US vs. the UK

The Bhangra Showdown, Feb13th

Shivani Subramaniam

The Danceworks studio is humming with excitement as the students, mostly South Asians, stretch and quietly chat along the walls. I loosen up my limbs along with them, scanning the room for the instructor. All I know is that his name is Fidpal, but none of the people nearby are taking charge of the class. Suddenly the music starts up and I am surprised to see a grinning, Black man in a beanie jog up to the front and announce:

"Hello-o-o! My name is Fidpal and I'm your instructor this evening. Let's get started!"

After I got over my initial shock, I was deeply curious how this Black British man developed so much expertise in bhangra. Bhangra is certainly an international artform, but it is usually centered within South Asian diasporas. After an intense, lively class, Fidpal and I sat in an empty studio as he narrated his bhangra origin story.

Fidpal first encountered bhangra in university. As an immigrant from Ghana, he felt "lost" during his teen years. "I was not British enough, and I was so far removed from my own culture as to no longer be Ghanian enough either." When

Fidpal discovered bhangra, it was as though he found a “new identity”. He quickly became comfortable with it due to the cultural parallels between Ghana and Punjab. Engaging with bhangra and being part of a competitive dance team also brought Fidpal great personal growth. “I developed as a person, and I became a young adult because of bhangra.”

As a nascent bhangra dancer myself, Fidpal’s fascination with bhangra as a form of comfort and familiarity, but also a vehicle for exploration and discovery resonated really strongly. For me, bhangra has always been an expression of joy and exhilaration, but also an interesting cultural phenomenon. I wondered how we learned moves, style, and drumming and continued to reproduce them. Why was the UK bhangra scene so distinctive from the US when they are not functionally dissimilar? How can Fidpal, a Ghanian-Brit based in London, and me, an Indian American raised in Iowa speak a common language of dance and culture?

What is bhangra?

Bhangra is a folk-dance form originating in the Punjab region between Pakistan and India that was traditionally performed by men. It is characterized by broad, exuberant gestures, jumping, and clapping, to the beat of the *dhol* (drums) and *tumbi* as accompaniment. Bhangra has connotations of being war-like and performed around war camps to lift spirits and channel aggression. This dance form has been carried by the diaspora across the globe to America, Britain, and even Australia. But as Fidpal’s story demonstrates, bhangra culture today is no longer only for Punjabis. It connects diasporas across the globe, creating multicultural communities linked by a mutual language of dance and music.

Tumbi *Dhol*

Each place developed a unique culture surrounding bhangra that fused and combined local influences (majority culture and other minorities) with Punjabi traditions. In the US, bhangra is a relatively new culture developed in the last decade or so that is focused on opportunities for dance performance. By contrast, bhangra music developed first in the UK starting as far back as the 60s with earlier waves of immigration and boomed in the 80s and 90s with a dance scene emerging only in the early 2000s.

I began this research assuming that UK bhangra dancers must be much more traditional and "authentic" because of their longer diasporic history. Instead, I found that the reality in both places is not nearly as simple as I had assumed.
As the conversation moved to bhangra across in the UK, Fidpal told me that British bhangra is organized into three main categories- commercial, competitions, and academies.

Commercial refers to troupes that perform standard dance numbers at weddings, corporate meetings, and big events dressed in full regalia, simply to earn money doing something they enjoy. For many South Asians, commercial performances are a relatively low-stakes side gig that supplements their income and connects them with the local community.

Bhangra Dance London website

Competitive teams are usually formed at the university level and spend most of the year preparing for regional and national competitions against other schools. This involves costumes and props on an even bigger scale and is strongly influenced by judge preferences and norms of competition.

Imperial College bhangra team

Academies are intended to teach students the fundamentals of bhangra, appeal to a wider audience outside of the Punjabi community, and often recruit new team members for competitive teams.

Nachda Sansaar dance academy in Birmingham

My initial impression was that competitive teams are more prominent in the US and academies are more prominent in the UK. I suspected this was due to differing timelines and variables influencing the development of the bhangra scene in both places. I set out to explore all three in the U.S. and the U.K. over the course of six months.

Commercial

Stepping out of the Southall Station in London is like being transported to pre-Partition Punjab. Instead of stately, brick buildings, chic passers-by, and

kitschy tourist shops, you are greeted first by the Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara, a squat rectangular building painted in orange and yellow with a Khalsa flag flying high.

Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Southall, London

The “Never Forget 1984” sign refers to the high-profile military confrontation Operation Blue Star at the Golden Temple in Amritsar that caused damage to the temple and many citizen casualties. Even in the diaspora, almost forty years later, Sikh communities remember the history, rife with conflict from the beginning, that shapes them. Both inside the temple and without, people walk by dressed in classic salwar-kameez (or long tunics and jeans) in South Asian prints, but often with more bedazzling than is strictly authentic. Bollywood has left its rhinestone footprint on the diaspora in Britain and America. The streets of Southall are filled with jewelry, clothing, and food stores selling outrageously ostentatious gowns, lehengas, bracelets, necklaces and more for anything between £90 to £90,000. With signs in English, Hindi, or Gurmukhi, the store names indicate variation in the owners’ religious affiliations (Hindu, Muslim, Sikh) and regions of origin (India,

Pakistan, Afghanistan). All these identities are mixed together on the street, living side-by-side, strangely reminiscent of pre-Partition Punjab—if you ignore the red double-decker buses and iPhones.

In fact, bhangra itself can blur the national divides of Partition and allow Pakistani and Indian Punjabis, in particular, to mingle on the basis of our cultural heritage. It reminds us that although we are distinct and separated by borders and conflict, we are also deeply connected by our shared history.

This critical mass of Punjabi Brits has infiltrated and redefined mainstream culture and music giving us popular movies like *Bend It Like Beckham* and top-charting songs like "Mundian To Bach Ke" whose global appeal defined the nineties. Bhangra's popularity in the U.K. is partly owed to the parallel music scene which boomed in the 70s and 80s producing top-charting songs for almost a decade.

I hopped a train to the lively city of Birmingham to discuss bhangra music with Professor Rajinder Dudrah, who has pioneered a unique cultural studies approach to study bhangra culture in the UK. As we sat in a little café called Damascena and sipped spiced tea with baklava, Prof. Dudrah explained that, "Bhangra developed as a kind of young music, particularly in the 80s and 90s when the emergent second and nascent third generation of British [South] Asians were born in the UK. They had some connection to South Asia but not much other

than parental stories and visits, if they did." He elaborated that "their cultures were the popular cultures, youth cultures of Britain at the time- in the 70s, 80s, and 90s" which were combining "pop, hip-hop, a bit of Bollywood, perhaps some funk culture too." Prof. Dudrah describes bhangra's role in this music scene as "a kind of conversation, a dialogue, where people in the playgrounds, the clubs, colleges, and community halls were thinking about themselves and their everyday lives in and through the music."

Birmingham, known for its thriving live bhangra music, has a strong rivalry with London's techno-bhangra scene. Many groups such as the Bhujhangy Group got their start in Birmingham before going on to achieve global recognition.

In general, for South Asians living in Britain, bhangra culture has a big presence in their lives and aspirations. While in London, I attended a "Bounce Bhangra" class at the local community hall (the British equivalent of a YMCA). For £5, you could try "bhangracise" with a group of fifteen other desis ranging in age from 20 to 40 years old. I expected to learn classic bhangra moves and perhaps perform them at a faster pace easily enough. Instead, I, a competitive dancer, was put through one of the most brutal workouts of my life.

Covered in sweat with legs the consistency of jelly, I sat on the ground after the class to talk to the instructors Vik and Manu. The brothers told me that growing up, they only saw bhangra danced at weddings and festivals. It was after they joined university that they discovered newly formed competitive bhangra teams. In comparing bhangra music from the UK to that of India, they commented:

"I think from what I've heard is that a lot of the UK population doesn't necessarily understand Punjabi that well, so they just want party songs. Whereas obviously the community in India has a much better understanding of what the lyrics mean and all that kind of stuff. So, there was more demand for…. for like, you know, something with a bit more depth to it rather than just like, you know, a party kind of thing."

Naturally, this music appeals to similar diasporas in the US and Canada. The movement of bhangra music to the US was the beginning of an ongoing conversation between both places that many attribute the generation of the US bhangra dance scene to. The U.S. has no real bhangra music scene of its own, and is certainly not part of the mainstream, so bhangra only occurs in insular groups and for specific occasions such as weddings or competitions. Only in the last

decade have basement bhangra groups and DJs started using bhangra sounds in places like New York City and New Jersey.

Performance

In the US, bhangra is most often danced with performance as the ultimate goal. Competitions, which usually take place at the collegiate level, are relatively well-funded in the U.S. with established clubs and organizations across the country. Cornell University, the University of Michigan, and all of the Bay Area are some of the defining forces of competitive bhangra. While doing this research, I had the opportunity to see both The Bhangra Showdown (TBS) in East London and Naach di Cleveland, three months later. Both performances were about spectacle but in different ways.

"khundi"- cane

"saap"- snake/accordian, *The Vancouver Sun*

TBS featured purely bhangra dance on-stage and a used a variety of props (sapp/saap, khundi/a). Some even used pyrotechnics on stage to highlight the climax of the dance. The event featured a total of six different schools and were always mixed gender groups. The music was at top volume and the dancers

performed a full bhangra dance set from beginning to end for approximately 8-10 minutes at very fast speeds with occasional slow sections peppered in.

[video] Leicester Bhangra, The Bhangra Showdown, (Feb 13th, 2022)

In Naach di Cleveland, half of the groups identified as “bhangra” and the other half were “fusion”, meaning they mixed bhangra, Bollywood, and hip-hop dances. Each school performed a series of dance numbers with a narrative thread, overarching theme, and even acting between numbers. Themes varied from Peppa Pig to “a deal with the devil” with accompanying costumes and sets in the background. One of the most memorable dances for me was the group Shikari, an all-women team costumed as archers from the Hunger Games. Watching an all-female troupe perform a traditionally male dance and effectively embody the masculine personae of bhangra dancers was powerful and redefined many of my personal notions of gender in bhangra.

[video] Farishtey, Naach di Cleveland (March 19th, 2022)

Teams frequently mashed and mixed songs, changing style and tone every 20 seconds or so. By the end of a set, the audience is left reeling by the number of different styles, moods, speeds, and narrative pieces demonstrated in ten minutes.

There were a lot of similarities in the moves and sequences each group used and, although very fun, I found the competition dancing to be somewhat formulaic. Overall, competitions in the US demand more versatility and range from teams' participation while UK competitions require great precision of execution and are more regional than national.

Academies

Academies are numerous and easy to find throughout the UK, but much less common in the United States. I spoke over Zoom with one of the biggest names today in bhangra- Bhangra Empire. California-based founder, Omer Mirza, explained,

"Growing up, there were no classes you could take. Everyone was kind of teaching themselves and trying to figure it out as they go."

After graduating from college most people have to leave bhangra behind, but Omer wanted to keep his momentum going. He was addicted to the dance and the lifestyle. Bhangra Empire accepts team members anywhere from 18-40yrs old and provides continuity and involvement beyond university years.

The socioeconomic demographics of both diasporas also determines the accessibility of the form. The UK Punjabi population can largely be characterized as working class which is in direct contrast to highly educated and professionalized Punjabi Americans. This is largely because early immigration to the United Kingdom was driven by poverty, a lack of job opportunities, and economic loss post-Partition. Sikh soldiers for the British army suddenly had no employment and the UK was desperately in need of unskilled labor, so they recruited from their former colonies. This created a kind of class solidarity in the UK and universality in bhangra that allows people like Fidpal to exist. Punjabi Americans, by contrast, immigrated as the "cream of the crop"; highly educated, middle-upper class people looking for less competitive job markets to enter. While they were still subject to racism and xenophobia, they had the means to carve out certain cultural niches for self-expression in the US, particularly in more recent generations.

This is reflected in the way bhangra operates today. In the UK, academies are necessary to recruit team members and fundraise for future performances because they are not funded internally by colleges. Only through crowdsourcing are they able to compete. When Fidpal explained this to me during our interview, I

was shocked given how comparatively well-funded collegiate bhangra teams are by their home institutions in the US. Additionally, bhangra classes were generally more affordable in the UK, costing anywhere from £5 ($5.88 USD) to £13 ($15.29 USD) and are often held in community centers or public spaces. In the US, an individual has to pay $199 for an 8-week course with Bhangra Empire. Omer comments on this saying,

"We're in the Bay Area, right? So, everybody here is well off."

Bhangra Empire at a basketball game

Bhangra Empire class

The socioeconomic demographic of each diaspora heavily determines the ways they produce and reproduce bhangra. Each area has its own set of norms and

standards for bhangra, all aimed at preserving the fundamental values established centuries ago in the Punjab. On the one hand, Fidpal and I are able to connect using music and dance as our vehicle of communication, but our associations with "bhangra" and the culture surrounding it are bound to be vastly different. For British South Asians, bhangra will always represent a British working-class anthem of strife and a way of creating space for Brown (and sometimes Black) people in an explicitly classist society. In contrast, for me, bhangra will always be a creative outlet that connects disparate groups across the US through our shared heritage and a legitimization of my Indian American identity.