Let me begin with a newspaper report from London published a couple of years back, which was titled: “Britney goes Bhangra for comeback”\(^1\) and states:

Britney Spears will jive to Bhangra rhythms for her comeback song later this year. The song \textit{Me Against the Music} features Spears singing and rapping Indian rhythms remixed by British Asian producer and songwriter Rishie Rich – himself celebrating a top-20 hit in the UK this month with \textit{Nachna Tere Naal} (Dance With You).

BHANGRA: ORIGINS, HISTORY AND THE BONDS THROUGH MUSIC

What is all this fuss about Bhangra, one might ask? Simply defined, Bhangra is a lively form of music and dance that originated in the Punjab region in Southeast Asia over five hundred years ago.\(^2\) It began as a part of harvest festival celebrations; it eventually became part of such diverse occasions as weddings and New Year celebrations. In the late 1960s and 1970s, several singers from Punjab set the stage for Bhangra to become a mass phenomenon. These singers, some of whom are still active today, include Kuldip Manak, Amar Singh Chamkila, and A.S. Kang. It was not until the early eighties that Bhangra moved from “secluded halls and venues to the bright lights of the clubs and cities in England.” During the last thirty years, Bhangra has enjoyed a surge in popularity worldwide, both in traditional form and as a fusion with genres such as hip-hop, house, reggae and drum-and-bass. First generation Asians were intrigued by their musical heritage, and helped bring Bhangra to the mainstream in their new country. Artists like Malkit Singh whose first album \textit{Nach Gidhe Wich} (1984) made Bhangra a strong hit among South Asians worldwide and after its release Malkit and his band moved to the United Kingdom to continue their work. Gurdaas Mann also had a huge impact on Bhangra music. The group Alaap, fronted by Channi, the man made famous by his white scarf, hails from Southall, a Punjabi area in London. Their album \textit{Teri Chunni De Sitaray}, released in 1982 by Multitone, created quite a stir at a time when Bhangra was still in its early days in the UK. This album played a critical role in creating an interest in Bhangra among Asian university students in Britain. Heera, fronted by Kumar and Dhami, was one of the most popular bands of the eighties. Their album \textit{Diamonds} is notable for being one of the first Bhangra albums to successfully mix western drums and synthesizers with traditional Punjabi instruments. Several other influential groups appeared around the same time, including Apna, from Birmingham, and the Bhujungy Group.

Bhangra took massive steps towards mainstream credibility in the 1990s, especially among youths. The most influential of these young superstars was the “Canadian folkstar,” Jazzy Bains. “Jazzy B” as he is commonly referred to, has become one of the pre-eminent Bhangra artists in the world after his debut in 1992. His second album, \textit{Folk and Funky} has a traditional Punjabi beat but he has taken up a particularly modern, thug-
like image for himself, perhaps helping his popularity in the process. Another famous young Bhangra superstar is Bhinda Jatt, “the folk warrior of California.” Balwinder Safri, based in the UK, gives strong vocal to classic tracks. From his first album *Reflections* (1991) to *Get Real* (1994) and *Legends* (1995) he has reaped tremendous success around the world.

As Bhangra continues to move into mainstream culture it has taken the entertainment industry by storm. One also notices a gradual evolution and change in its pattern and this change comes in the blending of pop and remixes. These remixes continued to gain popularity as the nineties came to an end. Artists like Bally Sagoo who described his music as “a bit of tabla, a bit of the Indian sound, but bring on the bass lines, bring on the funky-drummer beat, bring on the James Brown samples.” Daler Mehandi and his music known as “Bhangra Pop” has also mesmerized the world with tracks such as *Bolo Ta Ra Ra* and *Ho Jayegee Balle Balle*. Towards the end of the decade, Bhangra continued its assault on mainstream culture, with artists like Bally Sagoo and Apache Indian signing with international recording labels like Sony and Island. Moreover, Multitone Records, one of the major recording labels associated with Bhangra in Britain in the eighties and nineties, was bought by BMG. Finally, a recent Pepsi commercial launched in Britain featured South Asian actors and Bhangra music. This, perhaps more than anything else, is a true sign of the emergence of Bhangra into popular culture. Now Bhangra beats have been reinvented in the UK, thrilling young music lovers and appalling traditionalists alike.

**EAST-WEST ENCOUNTERS**

*Desi*-remix culture first appeared in cross-generational sites of ethnic heritage with affinities to celebrations such as Navratri and Diwali. While the younger generation initially felt disdain for these venues where his parents’ generation congregated, the appeal of remix versions of Asian music quickly galvanized his attention. The genesis of remix culture in such sites suggests that desi youth culture is the product of a complex and unstable negotiation between parents and children. As Marie Gillespie has stressed, teenagers, the traditional subject of analysis by culture studies theorists interested in subcultures, are at an interstitial point in their lives.\(^3\) Exposed to a wide variety of cultural influences as a result of the proliferation of electronic media, contemporary adolescents develop remarkable skills at maneuvering in and between particular cultures. This is, of course, particularly true for youths growing up in a diasporic context since they must learn to code switch between the values and cultural forms of the dominant white community and those of the ‘parent’ community in which they have been raised. As Stuart Hall and his colleagues argue in their classic analysis of youth subcultures, adolescents are “double articulated,”\(^4\) subject to pressure from at least two different sites in the social formation.

It is a well-known fact that the *desi*-remix of Bhangra occurred in Britain much earlier than it did in the United States or Canada. This probably had to do with the nature of the Indian immigrant and also the period of his immigration. Earlier, the favorite soundtracks popular among the British Asian community were the latest Hindi film songs exported from India or Pakistan. Unable to identify India or Pakistan as home, the young second
generation South Asians sing about their immediate experiences in Birmingham or Southall or New York or Toronto. The lyrics are parodies of inane Hindi music and the creative space exists in-between the disjunction of the expected and that which exists, in traversing the trajectory from mimicry to parody. Take for instance some of the lines from Apache Indian’s *Arranged Marriage*:

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Me wan gal fe me Don Rani
Me wan gal dress up in a sari
Me wan gal say soorni logthi
Me wan gal sweet like jlebee
Me wan gal from Jullunder City
Me wan gal say a soorni curi
Me wan gal mon to look after me
Me wan gal to mek me roti
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Bhangra’s appeal in or outside India appears to lie in its ethnic differences, its *punjabiyyat*. Whenever artists have attempted to dilute the Punjabi difference, say by using Hindi lyrics, their albums have bombed in the market. In an interesting report about how the Bhangra has gripped the non-resident Indians in the United Kingdom, Lavina Melvani\(^5\) informs us that the new Bhangra, though born of the rural traditions of Punjab, is very much immigrant music, incorporating the music played in decaying English industrial cities and Trinidadian neighborhoods. If the immigrants hadn't come to the United Kingdom, this music would not have been created. As Sadie O observes in *SF Weekly*:

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Ever since Gandhi, Britons have been embracing certain aspects of East Indian culture (like Vindaloo and Bhangra) with relish (or possibly chutney). Like Vindaloo, Bhangra has passed through the collective digestive tract of the United Kingdom and emerged profoundly changed. Unlike Vindaloo, Bhangra will only keep you up all night in order to dance. [ video clip RDB – unstoppable medley award – note the significance of rhythm, dhol, bass]
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**THE BRITISH SCENE**

The British Bhangra scene developed in a manner that supports the idea of double articulation, the theory already established and mentioned by Stuart Hall and other cultural anthropologists. Since their parents were unlikely to allow them to attend late-night clubs frequented by youths of other ethnic backgrounds, British Asian teens originated the “day-timer,” a party typically thrown in a pub or community hall for students who were truant from school in order to dance to the latest Bhangra tracks. The traditional sound of the dhol drum was quickly updated through the addition of synthesized beats, electric guitars and music from the Hindi film music tradition. Mix masters took this process of syncretization much further. Their music spliced together the disjointed, convulsive rhythms of contemporary club music with the myriad
traditions of sub-continental music making and the resulting musical forms testify to what now has to be termed the multiple articulation of British Asian cultures.

Asian culture has been ‘kool’ in Britain for quite some time. Fusion artists like deejays Talvin Singh, State of Bengal, Badmarsh and Shri, Apache Indian, and Bally Sagoo, to name but a few of the crossover stars in Britain’s musical firmament, spearheaded the new Indo-chic which focused mainstream attention on Britain’s Bhangra subculture. Indian Lion, a UK Bhangra artist explains why the Bhangra industry has not grown in North America nearly as much as it has grown in the United Kingdom:

The reasons there’s a lot of bands in England is because there’s a lot of work in England. In England the tradition that’s been going on for years now is that there’s weddings happening up and down the country every weekend, and its part of the culture that they have Bhangra bands come and play, who get paid 1800 quid a shot, you know. Most of the bands are booked up for the next two years. And England is a country where you can wake up in the morning and by lunchtime you can be at the other end of the country. It helps. In Canada it takes three days to get to the other side of the country, so there’s no circuit there. And it isn’t a tradition [in American] to have live music at weddings.

The very latest Bhangra success story as has been mentioned earlier is that of Britney Spears whose *Me Against the Music* was mixed by Rishi Rich, one of the key figures in the development of Bhangra in Britain. In January 2003 he formed the Rishi Rich Project, a group aimed at showcasing fresh talent. He soon launched Juggy D, and rapper and singer Jay Sean into the limelight. As well as Spears, Rich has worked with several other top western artists, including the American singer and actor Jennifer Lopez, and British Rhythm and Blues singer Craig David.

An important icon in the British Bhangra scene is Panjabi MC, a rapper from Coventry in Central England, who hit the limelight with his single *Beware of the Boys* (*mundiyaan ton bach ke raheen*) – the first Bhangra single released on a mainstream label to reach the UK Top Ten. This single is a classic example of Bhangra’s fusion with western influences. As the available video clip illustrates, the song moulds Punjabi lyrics and a typical Bhangra rhythm with western sounds, including the famous bass line from the theme tune of the American TV series *Knight Rider*. It has to be kept in mind that Punjabi lyrics drum home their foreignness in non-Punjabi contexts. This may be further illustrated by the above-mentioned international Bhangra hit whose lyrics are being globally shared on multiple websites. Joe Caps’ transcription of *mundiyaan ton bach ke raheen*, appears to be a speech to text translation, foregrounds Punjabi as a foreignness eluding the Anglo-American speech text’s memory. While the speech text is a fairly accurate phonetic transcription of the song’s sounds, they sound like pure gibberish. Non-Punjabis receive and decode Punjabi lyrics as a nonsensical combination of sounds, but their repetition of the Punjabi sounds sans meaning writes them out of the song’s semantic sphere. Recognizing this intuitively, Jay Z raps on Panjabi MC’s *mundiyaan ton bach ke raheen* but steers free of transliteration:
Most elements of traditional Bhangra music, including the use of Punjabi lyrics, the drum, the flute and other traditional Indian instruments, are used by the likes of Rich and Panjabi MC. However, the music is mixed with guitar, keyboards, and most significantly, a lively synthesized beat. Panjabi MC prides himself on being more listener-friendly than a lot of other producers and re-mixers. Talking about his album called Steel Bangle (1999) Panjabi MC says:

This music (Bhangra made outside of India) has wasted so many opportunities. It has always had great lyrics but is often held back by the musical content. Even though I’m using modern technology I’m employing traditional ways of moving people - like songs and chord structures - and a lot of it is built around what the people on the street, the people buying the music, are saying.

So, has Bhangra now become fully mainstream? Billy Grant, co-founder of 2Point9, the record company which manages Rishi Rich, thinks not:
There is a certain level of popularity with the music but it has by no means crossed over (into the mainstream). A few records have alerted the general public to the fact that there is a form of music that they may not have known much about. But, while the music is popular with young Asians, there is still a long way to go for it to achieve full crossover status.

DJ Chino, who owns the Asian record label Hi-Tech Music, based near Birmingham sees it differently:

Bhangra has entered the mainstream market. Birmingham is the main center for Bhangra in the UK, and here at least there has been a cultural crossover, as young English and Asian friends swap records. Bhangra has filled a void in the British market – not much is going on in British music at the moment.

Debate has also emerged about how long the current wave of popularity will last. Some view the future cautiously concerned with the fact that so much of the industry has jumped on the Bhangra bandwagon that it will probably kill the commercial side of the scene more quickly than it signed up. Other feel that the Asian youth respect their culture and by fusing Bhangra with western music they are able to create a music which is not only contemporary, but also their own.

THE AMERICAN SCENE

The class formation of the desi population in the United States differs markedly from that of Britain as a result of a pattern of elite bourgeois migration post 1965. This class formation has a distinct impact on cultural production. Hence the celebratory music of Punjabi farmers transformed by young Britishers of Asian origin certainly crossed the Atlantic into the American music scene, but not in the explosive way it has hit the United Kingdom. Though there are not so many live bands in the United States as there are in Britain and Canada, yet since the mid 1990’s onwards, Bhangra in the United States has become extremely popular too. Bhangra, imported from the England via CDs and audiocassettes, is now making such an impact in America that cultural anthropologists are considering the plural dance cultures of the South Asian diaspora a seminal topic of research.

Immigrants, as they become part of the American culture, incorporate bits and pieces of their own traditions into it and that transforms American pop culture. While modern Bhangra may be something very new for mainstream audiences, the ever-growing South Asian community in America has embraced it, especially second-generation Indian Americans. Apart from the scores of names popularized now [a long list of their websites being a ready reckoner], several top names like major record labels in the United Kingdom and the United States have signed Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo.

A simple report by Ashley Dawson illuminates the situation further:

On a sweltering August afternoon in 1996, New York City’s Summer Stage concert series brought the South Asian dance music known as Bhangra to Central Park. South Asian families from all over the tri-state area sunned themselves, jostled for room, and danced in a jam-packed sandy space under the sun-dappled plane trees. New York turntablism DJ Rekha added some hometown flavor, spinning Bhangra remixes to much applause before the Safri Boys, one of Britain’s hottest Bhangra bands took the stage. Although Bhangra
remix had been transforming South Asian youth culture in the US at least since the release of UK musician Bally Sagoo’s path breaking “Star Crazy” album in 1991, the concert in Central Park was a particular milestone. Here, visible to a broad public, was a display of the compelling cultural forms through which South Asians of the diaspora were articulating new, composite identities. The multiple regional contrasts and tensions that define identity within the subcontinent were harmonized in this diasporic context.  

Since 1996 onwards Central Park Summer Stage, which is a project of the City Parks Foundation, has been organizing Bhangra concerts in Central Park, drawing 6,000-8,000 people. New York’s popular disc jockey Magic Mike spun Bhangra remixes and Caribbean Ricky Jai and singer Najma also performed. Later Safri Boyz performed there to the delight of a mixed crowd, which included every one from American kids to Punjabi grandmothers. What is most interesting to note is that although the audience was principally South Asian, there were also many Americans in the audience. According to Bill Bragin, director of “Summer Stage” at that time, the appeal of Bhangra was irresistible due to certain reasons:

Bhangra has very new sounds for a lot of ears but at the same time its rhythm is very strong for dance halls. It’s adaptable and adapting so that it can be combined with a lot of different genres; it bears a lot of reference points for people who are not familiar with traditional Bhangra. I think a lot of what’s happening with pop music around the world is people who are listening to Western pop and dance music equally with music from their own heritage are trying not to make a distinction between one or the other but are coming to it as an equal influence. He adds that this new Bhangra is more self-consciously crossover, combining with hip-hop, jungle, reggae and rock & roll. Just as the young Asian community in the United Kingdom closely mingled with their Caribbean friends, so it was a self-conscious attempt to find a musical form that was distinctly Indian chutney and soca music combined together. This resulted in the hybridization of cultures and the emergence of Bhangra as one form of diasporic music. As Hindi film music was also incorporated into the calypso music as well as into the Bhangra beat, the traditional Bhangra tunes gradually moved to a modernized western version.[Video clip of Nelly Furtado Feat Josh desi remix] Here one is reminded of the growing number of Bhangra competitions that are held in many of the main cities of the United States, Canada and England where young Punjabis, other South Asians and also people with no South Asian background compete for money and trophies.

People's musical tastes are very much a part of their background, and that is especially true for immigrants. They seem to identify with the music of the neighborhoods they grew up in, be it white or Caribbean. In fact deejays have taken traditional, familiar stuff and reinvented it, redefined it via mixes and beats. Nothing is too way out or too obscure, be it Hindi or regional, such as Tamil film music. One of the things that made it so significant and dynamic is that it encouraged exchange of cultures on both sides. [video clip of Snap- The Power of Bhangra]

Of course everyone is not equally enthused by the infiltration of Bhangra in the New World. For example, Krishneil Maharaj finds deep-rooted implications in the popularity of this art form. According to him,
A funny thing happens to a people when they immigrate to a new land: they start reminiscing about their old land. Their children, born in the new land, undergo a similar fascination with the land of their parents. South Asian immigrants and their children in the US are no different in this regard.

Over President’s Day weekend, hundreds of South Asian youths converged at the Kaiser Convention Center in Oakland for the annual Dhol Di Awaaz Bhangra dance competition. Now, whether they acknowledge it or not, the participants are taking part in a process of historical and cultural revision.

What’s interesting about bhangra is that it takes us back to a time in South Asian history, to rural areas, where crops were plentiful, where people were happy and had plenty of causes to celebrate. Now, this pastoral South Asia is an immigrant fantasy borne out of South Asian Americans’ dreaming of an idyllic Indian past. What Bhangra does, in a way, is to present a conservative interpretation of Indian history in which the glaring problems in the rural areas are overlooked. Issues like the inequity of landownership, class conflict, the displacement of peasants, a history of famine, and the gross neglect by the Indian state and society of the rural poor are brushed away by the desire of South Asians to dream of their homeland in romantic terms.

You’re probably saying: How did you get all that from a dance?

I know it is not the job of entertainment events to educate people. I am well aware that one does not go to a cultural or social event to receive a lecture in history. I wouldn’t go to a rap concert and expect to be lectured on Atlantic slavery. But those with progressive vision must acknowledge that the events we hold and the things we celebrate about our culture must make it possible for us to gain a real sense of our history, even the ugliest aspects of it.¹⁰

Since its launch in 1997, Basement Bhangra has forced New York to sit up and take notice of Bhangra, rapidly making the outsider art-form an essential part of the NYC club scene. Although Basement Bhangra’s success is built on loyalty to the sensibilities of its core audience, the 1st Thursday of every month finds S.O.B.’s over-flowing with a crowd that comes in every shape and color. The monthly event and the international Bhangra phenomenon it helped spark have received extensive attention from national and international press, making the cover of Billboard magazine, features on Dutch and Japanese television, and most recently on the WB11 News at 10. Another interesting phenomenon is noticed in the New York club called “Mutiny” (opened in 1997) that seeks to foster diasporic affiliation across ethnic differences. “Mutiny” draws both its aesthetic and its political inspiration from the overtly anti-racist traditions of British Asian youth culture and is an important venue for the forging of trans-Atlantic links between the Asian diaspora in Britain and America. A significant number of “Asian underground” deejays have performed here, including Talvin Singh, State of Bengal, Badmarsh and Shri, and Joi. Although these British performers and their anti-racist ethos played a formative role for the club, Mutiny consciously pairs these British performers with local talent. This potential mix suggests that the new Black Atlantic ties being woven on the dance floor of the club Mutiny are also helping forge bonds of cultural solidarity among New York’s community of color.

A report “Indian music Now in US Mainstream” published in Hindustan Times on Sunday 13, 2004 states:

America has a different sort of Indian summer this year. Nightclubs have picked up tabla rhythms, “Bollywood disco” classes have boomed, rappers have started to tap into Indian
music. The popularity of American hip-hop has helped bring into the mainstream music what a new generation from India has been reinventing for years. Producer Panjabi MC has teamed up with rapper Jay-Z, Missy Elliott has sampled Indian elements in her music, the summer hit song Move Your Body has a Bhangra flavour. “The music is more widely heard,” says Rekha Malhotra, aka DJ Rekha, who’s been promoting Indian music in the US for years. “We have a new audience, people come because it’s very danceable.” And first-generation Americans form a strong core of the fan base. Gyms across New York, including the popular NY Sports Clubs, are offering “Bhangra masala” aerobics classes. People at the “Bollywood Axion” classes literally have to elbow their way in. The trend gained speed first in Britain, where during the 1990s artistes like Talvin Singh and Nitin Sawhney blended traditional music with electronica.

Some critics see the westernized Bhangra scene in the United States as derivative because it is still dependent on music from the subcontinent and from Britain where most of all the Bhangra bands are still based. In fact, it is one of the factors that force the desi remix culture in America to remain a subculture. Despite the peculiar power of music to cross borders and break down barriers, the hybrid space on the dance floor is always deeply sedimented with prior and political meanings. Regional and national chauvinism, gender and class inequality, and complex forms of internal and external racism all have an impact on the remixed Bhangra being produced. However, with the emergence of North American Bhangra artists such as Jazzy Bains, Bhinda Jatt, and Sangeet Group, and the growth of the remix market, the future for Bhangra in this continent looks good. Bohemia, the Punjabi Rapper and one of the hottest names in the American music circuit says that he is proud of being a desi:

I’m proud of my culture. You have to be vocal about who you are. I had to prove that I’m not a tourist. My friends are from different religious backgrounds and races. But we connect at a level.

After the 9/11 attacks, desi artistes faced challenges from various quarters. According to Pooja Jain, manager of Bohemia, post 9/11, desi recording artists living abroad have been challenged to rise above the preconceptions that surround them, and their art has been taken to higher heights, as they’ve strived to express themselves as desis first, and artists later. In general, the fan base has appreciated seeing an even more raw form of these individuals that they regard so highly.

VIDEO DOCUMENTARIES
That the diasporic South Asians in the western world are caught between cross-cultural values is not a new phenomenon. There are innumerable documentaries and mainstream feature films that focus on biracial ethnicity, exploration and South Asian self-identity. Some directors tackle the issue rather lightheartedly (the recurrence of the ABCDs is a pointer); others do the soul-searching with more seriousness, in the cinema-verite style. Amidst the plethora of themes, one common area that has drawn the attention of several filmmakers is Bhangra, the folk music of Punjab, which has come to acquire new political and cultural resonance for the South Asian diaspora.
Leaving aside the debate whether Bhangra in its hybrid forms enriches or diminishes the popular Indian dance form, I will now focus on five documentary films (coincidentally all made by women) that use the Bhangra to show the acculturation process in the New World. Since it began much earlier in Britain than in the U.S., the first documentary is by the well-known director Gurinder Chadha who uses this music as a backdrop in her exploration of various notions of Britishness through the eyes of different kinds of Asians in *I'm British But...*, (1990; 30 minutes) thus uncovering a defiant popular culture – a synthesis – part Asian, part British. "The evolution of British Bhangra and Bangla music marks the beginning of the end of British national chauvinism for those of us who have been born and brought up here. It has helped us define ourselves as a migrant community with a musical language of our own, created by us, for us, but open for enjoyment by all," says Chadha. In this witty and perceptive short film dealing with the South Asians in Britain, we have a Scottish-Pakistani sheep farmer, a Bangladeshi woman who lives in Belfast and an Indian girl who lives in Glasgow and has a Welsh twang to her voice. The accents are truly as diverse as possible and there is the unceasing Bhangra beat to make a true ‘bhelpuri’ of what it means to be British and Asian. If one follows the lyrics of the Bhangra song, as well as the rhythm, which is quite traditional, the most significant thing one notices is the tone of nostalgia—people yearning for the land they have left behind.

*Bhangra Jig* directed by Pratibha Parmar (4 minutes, 1991) was originally commissioned by Channel 4 to celebrate Glasgow as the European cultural capital. In this short film Pratibha Parmar continues to explore the Asian-Western encounter with a music video. A Scottish Asian woman, in a leather jacket and a tartan skirt walks through superimposed images of Glaswegian architecture, statues and the inside of a Mosque dome whilst these images are cut with young people dancing to a Bhangra soundtrack. In both images and sound Scotland meets Asia in this absorbing testimony to a multi-cultural Britain.

Another documentary by Pratibha, entitled *A Brimful of Asia* (1998, 24 minutes) is about the explosion of second generation Asian talent in mainstream British culture and features musicians Talvin Singh, Asian Dub Foundation and Cornershop as well as fashion designers and writers. It offers a fascinating guide to Asian cool.... successfully illustrating the wealth of intelligence, energy and influence being exhibited by young British Asians. So ultimately what we get is a lot of thought provoking stuff.

Nandini Sikand’s *Bhangra Wrap* (1994; 20 minutes) is an energetic documentary about a vibrant South Asian youth subculture that fuses hip-hop, rap and bhangra music. Based in Toronto, Canada and New York City, Nandini shows us how bhangra is a mix of old and new and is symbolic of universal cultural transformation for new generations. Bhangra House is propagated through alternative radio, party DJs and hip urban clubs where South Asian youth have carved out their own unique sense of style, identity and voice that is an uncompromised mixed of old and new, South Asian and American. “I have noticed that there is a different trend, especially among South Asians who have grown up here. They have become proud of their identity – earlier it was always trying to melt and assimilate,” Sikhand explained. “Now it’s like somebody wearing a Nehru
jacket or a bandini scarf and it’s just an assertion of that identity. And that’s where Bhangra really fits in.” [Video clip]

Tejaswini Ganti’s *Gimme Somethin’ to Dance To* (1995; 18 minutes) is a vibrant documentary on the desi remixes culture in the United States and it looks at how Bhangra produced in Britain with samples and rhythms from other music genres has found a place of prominence in New York’s music scene. “It seemed to me in the last two years, Bhangra has come to acquire a greater presence in the New York City because it was published about in Manhattan and had an event at the Central Park which is outside the Indian mix so to speak,” Ganti said. She made the video, her first, as part of her graduate study in Culture and Media at New York University. Documenting the rising popularity of Bhangra music, originally from the Punjab and popularized in England with the addition of Western instrumentation, rap and techno beats, and special effects Ganti shows us how popular over American radio stations, Bhangra music brings together ethnic groups within the expatriate Indian community. Featured are interviews with various radio DJ’s. She interviews Magic Mike and DJ Kucha, who talk about their desire to follow Bally Sagoo’s path to a major label recording contract and mass stardom. Ganti then cuts from this scene to an interview with DJ Rekha, who unequivocally states that she feels no need to have her work succeed with the dominant white music-listening public. This juxtaposition of starkly contrast viewpoints reveals a great deal about the forms of capital that circulate in different sectors of the desi population in New York. In addition to a politicized critique of the pressure for ethnic assimilation, there is also a kind of sub-cultural capital at work in Rekha’s pronouncement. As is true of so many other musical subcultures in the United States, claims to authenticity within desi club culture are centrally connected to the evasion of commercial success. That micro-politics of club cultures are clearly at work in this context is implied but not overtly discussed by Ganti.

The fifth documentary is Balvinder D. Mudan’s *Desi Remix Chicago Style* (1996; 46 minutes) which interviews Chicago area South Asian American musicians about their music, racism, and reclaiming their South Asian culture. Balvinder became aware of her identity and the conflicts she had with both the white culture and her parents’ Indian culture, as she was involved with student politics in Great Britain. She started using video to express these feelings. Then she came to New York to undertake further projects in documentary filmmaking. When she moved from New York City to Chicago, she received three grants for her documentary *Desi Remix Chicago Style* that won an award at The Chicago Asian American film Festival. Shot in Chicago and London this energetic documentary follows three very different Punjabi bands and their attempts to use their music as a bridge between competing cultural influences of India and America. They face and deal with racism, discover both desi sex and desi sexism, look for role models and confront politics, history, religion, and their own multiple heritages.

Last but not least, Swati Khurana and Leith Murgai’s *Desi Dub* (25 minutes, 1997) explores the Indipop/indofunk music scenes in New York City, as seen through the eyes of a popular Indian woman DJ.
CONCLUSION

These different explorations therefore lead us to a better understanding of how the Bhangra, in a mix of the old and the new, becomes symbolic of universal cultural transformation for new generations and how the Asian cultural scenario in the west is being constantly remixed into newer forms with every passing day. It also explains how a specifically diasporic cultural politics of nostalgia thus ironically has resulted in a transnational impact. As Ashley Dawson rightly points out, this cultural studies model should not be confused with the dominant sociological approaches of the day, which represents Asian youths as trapped in an “identity crisis” that robbed them of agency. Instead, the styles developed within subcultures should be seen as part of a symbolic repertoire through which young people attempt to win space, in both a literal and figurative sense, in relation to their double articulation.

Before concluding it must be mentioned that beginning as a form of lively folk music performed at harvests in the Punjab, Bhangra has evolved remarkably over the past five hundred years. The music fully represents the culture of the Punjab region, and the struggles of its people in their long and storied history. Moreover the music still evolves today, incorporating elements of different kinds of music from around the world, while still existing in its traditional form. Thanks to this diversification, Bhangra has reached all over the world and even in its hybrid form in the west, we can easily expect it to continue its movement into mainstream culture well into this century.

NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 For further details see Clint Kelly and Jasjeet Thind, “History of Bhangra” in the *Punjab Online* website.


5 Lavina Melwani, “Hum Sab Punjabi” www://ASANet.com

6 Video of Jay Sean “Dance With You” See [www.DaSingh.com](http://www.DaSingh.com)

7 I am grateful to Professor Anjali Gera Roy of Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur for providing me with this data and the transcribed lyrics of the song.


9 Krishneil Maharaj, “Bhangra: A Political Economic Breakdown” *hardboiled*

10 See website of www.basementbhangra.com for more details.

12 Vijaya S. Jodha, “Cultural Riches”. http://Welcome to Little India