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.

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. In an interesting report about how the bhangra has gripped the non-resident Indians in the United Kingdom, Lavina Melvani\(^1\) informs us that the new bhangra, born of the rural traditions of Punjab, is very much an 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*:

> 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.

This 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
audio cassettes, is now making such an impact in America that cultural anthropologists are considering the plural dance cultures of the South Asian American 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 Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo have been signed by major record labels in the United Kingdom and the United States.

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 turntablist 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 pathbreaking “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 ’n 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.

As Sadie O. points out:

Bally Sagoo is responsible for a huge chunk of the shift from traditional bhangra to modern multiple stylistic fusion. Rap and reggae merge with vocals by Pakistani devotional singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and these eclectic cuts "are seriously pumped up into mega-mixes for the dance floor, and DJs all over are discovering that they work as well for that purpose as more familiar Western styles."

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 which made it so significant and dynamic is that it encouraged exchange of cultures on both sides.
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.  

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 it's 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 a 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.

Over the last few years, Panjabi MC has played as a live act in Europe and the USA. His reaction of performing in New York City is interesting to note:

In the States, I have played primarily as a DJ in LA, San Francisco, Washington DC and Chicago but in June this year I did my first stage show in New York where I previewed some new tracks. I took along DJ Chani from P.J.D and vocalist, Kebi (I’ve worked with him on Mirza and he has great potential…he introduced a whole new visual and audio element to my stage set), and we played at a club which is predominately a World Music club in the heart of downtown New York. My PR manager suggested that it would be valuable exposure but initially I didn’t think I had the live set to pull it off, but at the end of the day we just blew the whole place up…it was an amazing response…totally unique. We managed to get a lot of press from the mainstream media. Sangam Entertainment Group who invited me over to New York did a very thorough media drive…we managed to attract a crowd that was largely Indian but at the same time the number of non-Asians there was also hard to believe…they were lapping up the traditional tunes!

What every bhangra artist lays emphasis on is therefore innovation and remixes. He prides himself on being more listener-friendly than a lot of other producers and re-mixers. Talking about his album called Steel Bangle (1999) Punjab 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.

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 forces 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.

II

Leaving aside the debate whether bhangra in its hybrid forms enriches or diminishes the popular Indian dance form, I will now focus on four 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 English, Scottish, Irish and Welsh Asians in I’m British But…, (1990; 30 mins) thus uncovering a defiant popular culture. Using Bhangra and Bangla music and the testimonies of young British Asians, the video uncovers 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."

(video clip)

Nandini Sikand’s Bhangra Wrap (1994; 20 mins) is the second 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.

(video clip)

Tejaswini Ganti’s *Gimme Somethin’ to Dance To* (1995; 18 mins) is a vibrant documentary on the *desi* remix 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. In the absence of the documentary at present let me give you a little more details about its contents. 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 fourth documentary is Balvinder D. Mudan’s *Desi Remix Chicago Style* (1996; 46 mins) which interviews with 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* which won an award at The Chicago Asian American film Festival.

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-American cultural scenario 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.

Notes and References:

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


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

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