



HAL
open science

When Bhangra Meets Hip-Hop. Articulating Hybridity on American Soil

Claude Chastagner, Rita Christian, Judith Misrahi-Barak

► **To cite this version:**

Claude Chastagner, Rita Christian, Judith Misrahi-Barak. When Bhangra Meets Hip-Hop. Articulating Hybridity on American Soil. Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée. India and the Indian Diasporic Imaginatio, 2011. hal-04393760

HAL Id: hal-04393760

<https://hal.science/hal-04393760>

Submitted on 15 Jan 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

When Bhangra Meets Hip-Hop Articulating Hybridity on American Soil

Claude CHASTAGNER

Université Paul-Valéry, Montpellier 3

The purpose of this paper is to explore the fate of Indian cultural practices when the centrifugal forces of the Diaspora take them to new shores, and lead them to interact with other artistic forms and societal organizations. To what extent do traditional practices retain their original flavor? Are they on the contrary significantly altered by the integration of non-Indian elements? Does the process lead to the development of hybrid, specifically diasporic genres? In other words, what forms does the diasporic imagination take? Our investigation shall focus on the evolution of bhangra music on American soil, and on the emergence of specifically American forms of bhangra. To what extent, and through what means, have these local forms changed the relationship between Indian immigrants and their host culture? How much have prejudices and cultural clichés been challenged by the growing recognition of South Asian music? Have these changes remained superficial, or do they entail a more permanent shift in the relationship?

For those not familiar with the genre, let us say a few words about bhangra music. Originally, bhangra was a folk dance performed by Punjabi farmers for harvest festivals (*bhaisakhi*), New Year celebrations (*mela*), and weddings. Gradually, bhangra moved to the cities, and the word came to describe the music as much as the dance. Two instruments prevail in both folk and contemporary bhangra: the *dhol*, double-sided barrel drums played with sticks, and the one-string *tumbi*, with the added percussive power provided by the *chimta*, a pair of metallic pliers. Bhangra songs also display a kind of call-and-response pattern, between the lead singer and a male choir that punctuates the melody with shouts of “hoi hoi”.

The Punjabi communities that settled in Britain after the Partition took bhangra with them, along other artistic practices. Traditional entertainment is a common form of community cement. Uprooted individuals and communities frequently use artistic practices to keep in touch with their homeland, and with one another. Jacqueline Warwick stresses that ‘the passing down of traditional musics and dances is a powerful agent in the preservation of a culture; this is especially true for immigrant communities’ (Warwick 1995: 6). Which is, incidentally, why we can concur with Thomas Turino that ‘the study of arts in relation to diasporic identities is not a peripheral concern, but rather is central to the very understanding of this type of social formation’ (Turino 2004: 4). Accordingly, bhangra started to play an increasing role as a shared cultural reference for

the various communities of South Asian immigrants, to the point of becoming, according to R. K. Dudrah, 'a metaphor for articulating cultural identities' (Dudrah 2003: 209). Once in Britain, though, bhangra evolved quickly. In the late seventies, second generation Indians hardened its beat, and added electric guitars, synthesizers, and drum machines. Lyrics in English complemented those in Punjabi, Hindi, or Urdu. Bhangra also integrated musical features borrowed from disco, R&B, or reggae, becoming what is known as British bhangra, an evolution that has continued until today. Among the most striking bands to appear in the seventies was Alaap, set up in 1977 in Southall, and still active on the music scene, and artists like Apana Sangeet, Kuldip Manak, or A.S. Kang. The development of British bhangra went on through the eighties and nineties with Gurdaas Mann, Malkit Singh, Bhinda Jatt, Anakhi, Intermix, Sati, or Saqi. Fueled by British youth's growing taste for clubbing and the impact of multiculturalism, British bhangra soon expanded outside the South Asian wedding parties circuit and became a staple of mainstream British clubs.

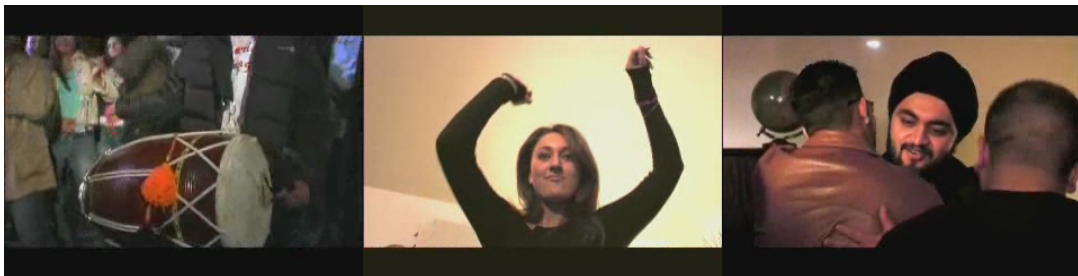
British bhangra's expansion was not only stylistic, but also spatial. It became extremely popular with the 25 million strong Indian diaspora, and British bands started touring overseas to meet the demand, playing in the USA (where 3 million PIO and NIR and half a million Pakistani immigrants live, mostly in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston), in Canada (with 1.5 million PIO, mainly in Toronto and Vancouver), and occasionally, to entertain immigrants settled in the Persian Gulf (4 million) and the South Asian communities of Malaysia and Singapore (another 5 million).

Eventually, bhangra returned, in its modified form, to the Indian subcontinent, with the result, notes Dudrah, that Punjabi bhangra 'has become more upbeat since it was introduced to its diasporic cousin' (Dudrah 2003: 219). It also came to occupy a particularly prominent place in recent Bollywood movies, which led, because of the popularity of these movies among the Indian diaspora, to further dissemination¹. In the course of this expansion, local forms of bhangra developed, in Canada, and the United States. These forms can thus be described as fundamentally diasporic music, not only because they walk in the footsteps of the Indian and Pakistani migrations, but also because they underscore the triadic relationship that defines a diaspora: a homeland (India and Pakistan), a host country (Great-Britain), and diasporic sites (the United States and Canada)².

¹ As Dudrah explains, 'Folk bhangra's meeting with the British bhangra beat soon caught on and in turn became translated into many late-nineties Bollywood film soundtracks. See Nazmrata Joshi, 'Musical Mystic', *India Today*, 1/3/1999:24h' (Dudrah 2003: 219).

² Tölölyan establishes a distinction between diasporas and mere dispersions. Dispersions lack the material resources, the socio-political infrastructure, and the discursive incentives that characterize genuine diasporas (Tölölyan 1996: 3). In this respect, the Indo-Pakistani immigration is indeed a diaspora.

American Bhangra, of Fremont, California, is one of the bands that have emerged in diasporic sites outside Britain. In 2007, it released its first, eponymous album, accompanied by a video of 'Tere Ishq Soniye', the song the band believed could be a hit. The song's most salient feature is that despite its unmistakably South Asian features, it owes a lot, visually and sonically, to American hip-hop. Its composers, Mandeep Taunk and Poppy, have combined traditional bhangra instruments, the flourish of the dhol and the acid sound of the tumbi (here an electronic one), with the spare, electronic beats typical of hip-hop. This is even clearer in the sung sections: whereas Jesh Raju's modulations, sung in Punjabi, follow Eastern melodic patterns, Kolosol's interjections in English belong to the rap genre (Kolosol himself is an African American rapper). Visual elements also partake of both styles. From the bhangra tradition, we get the ubiquitous dhol drums player, the bearded, turbaned Sikhs, the smart dance steps, and the merry, energetic ambience, traditionally (and stereotypically) associated to Punjab.



From the hip-hop tradition, along with the systematic low-angle shots, come the cruising shots, which allow classic glimpses of the SUV's rims (a staple of rap videos and lyrics), and views of the city at night, party scenes, which include drinking and dancing, and sartorial elements, such as baggy trousers and hoods.



The presence of an African American rapper as well as practices borrowed from hip-hop can be traced back to the situation in Britain, the original host country. 'In Britain, stresses Gregory Diethrich, where in fact Indians are usually subsumed under the label "black" (cf. Sanjay Sharma 1996), Indian artists like Apache Indian and Bally Sagoo "draw heavily upon black diasporic musical idioms (reggae, techno, house, soul) . . . and

practices (sampling, mixing, scratching)” (Gopinath 1995 311)’ (Diethrich 2004: 112).

The issue of the ‘blackness’ of the South Asian community deserves a few lines. In the fifties, ‘Black British’ was the phrase officially used to refer to any non-white British national. However, the term ‘black’ had derogatory connotations, and was used as a slur. Accordingly, in the late sixties and seventies, British African Caribbean and South Asian organizations tried to reclaim the term, and turn it into a political statement, encompassing all the groups who shared a common experience of oppression because of skin color, and lived under the threat of poverty and racial exclusion. They hoped a single label would foster a sense of group identity and lead to common political positions (Brah 1992: 131). For example, in 1979, the Southall Black Sisters organization formed ‘to meet the needs of black (Asian and Afro-Caribbean) women’. An important linguistic distinction between the United States and Britain must be made: in the USA, ‘Asian’ refers specifically to people of East or Southeast Asian ancestry (Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, etc.), while in British English, the term designates most commonly South Asians, and excludes East Asians.

The influence of the African American concept of Black Power and of radical groups such as the Black Panthers was obviously a strong influence in the adoption of the term ‘black’. As late as 1993, Asian band Fun[^]da[^]mental on their debut album, *Seize the Time*, were still drawing their inspiration from the nationalism of the Nation of Islam and the anti-colonialism of the Black Panthers. However, the situation in Britain was not comparable to that of the United States, not only because at the time, the British South Asian community was numerically superior, but also because in the British sense, ‘black’ referred to a shared legacy of colonialism, rather than one of slavery.

Scholars disagree as to whether ordinary British Asians ever felt comfortable with the appropriation of the term ‘black’. Avtar Brah contends that *kale* (black) was widely used, but other sources, like Tariq Modood, are convinced that a majority of Asians rejected it, and point to an uneasiness with the term, to which ‘brown’ was sometimes preferred (Imran Khan went as far as predicting ‘Brown is the new Black’, Khan 1997: 30). Modood asserted further in a seminal article that the concept harmed British Asians by encouraging ‘doublespeak’ and falsely equating racial discrimination with color discrimination, though in fact, Asians were mostly ostracized for cultural reasons (Modood 1994: 861). Besides, if calling themselves ‘black’ could enhance South Asians political clout, it also denied their specific cultural identity, and concealed their contribution to British culture.

Indeed, in the late eighties, the alliance fell apart under pressure from other diasporic allegiances. As James Clifford observed, ‘there is no guarantee of postcolonial solidarity’ (Clifford 1994: 309). Gradually, even activists stopped using the term ‘black’. In 1988, the Commission for Racial Equality recommended that Asians should no longer

be classified as black, while the official British Census now establishes a distinction between British South Asians and British Blacks.

The standard explanation for the involvement of British Indian artists with black genres such as hip-hop or reggae is that since these forms have been perceived as 'attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization' (Rose 1994: 21), they allow Indian Americans to articulate issues of racism and oppression, and to explore the tensions between marginalization and integration. In his study of Canadian bhangra, Diethrich underlines that 'one prominent aspect of desi music is the reliance on indices of African American culture' (Diethrich 2004: 112). In other words, the music of black youth is meaningful because it can be connected to a strong desire to assert one's identity, to a refusal to assimilate to white culture, and to strategies aiming at formulating a specific, non-white definition of what it means to be 'American'. Diethrich reads the link to 'blackness' as 'a sign of identification between the shared heritage of Indians and blacks as minorities, who, in greatly different ways and degrees, have both been oppressed' (Diethrich 2004: 113) and ostracized. Indeed, most of the African American, Creole, or Indian American performers I encountered on fieldwork for this and other projects described themselves as being in the 'margin', while resorting to the term 'center' to describe the white, mainstream record industry. Despite the recognition and wealth some of these artists have achieved, they still establish a distinction in terms of social space, either actual or imagined, between them and the dominant, white, Anglo-Saxon communities.

Such a connection between Indians immigrants and African Americans may seem at first improbable, be it only because of a difference in terms of status. If a sizeable percentage of the North American Indian diaspora makes up the bulk of cheap motels staff, it also encompasses a large proportion of university students, doctors, academics, or high tech engineers. For instance, Mandeep Taunk, of American Bhangra, graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, did his internship in a high-tech company, and when he turned to the music business, was able to set up a complete, and expensive studio in a corner of his father's warehouse, hardly the kind of environment hip-hop performers can usually afford.

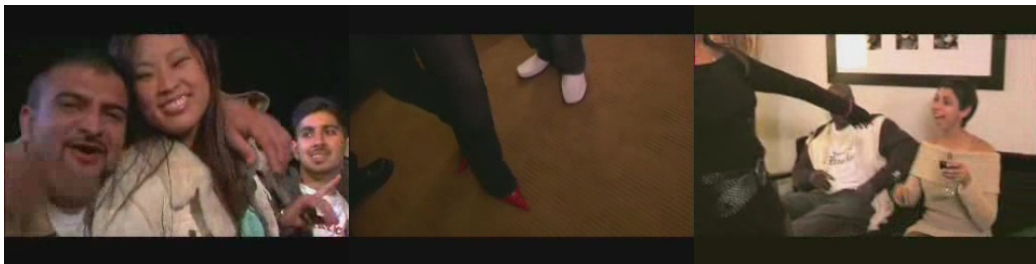
Nevertheless, despite their higher social status, Indian immigrants have suffered, and still do, from latent or blatant forms of racism and ostracism. Until recently, many South Asians were still prejudiced as passive, submissive, conformist, sexually repressed, smelly, or unkempt. These were sufficient reasons for experiencing a kinship with the oppression and marginalization experienced by the African-American community.

However, what is happening in our video suggests a different explanation for the involvement of Indian musicians with hip-hop. What we can see is much more than

the attempt by Indian musicians to incorporate for their own benefit the sounds and imagery of hip-hop, a few African-American ingredients intended to merely spice up their own brew. This is *American Bhangra*, as we are repeatedly reminded, and this has a few consequences.



One notices above all the conspicuous absence of the three basic elements of much hip-hop songs and videos, particularly frequent in Gangsta rap and Dirty South variants: violence, sex, and money. Here, the girls and boys are smartly dressed, with proper shoes, and do not display much flesh. The faces are bright and happy, inviting rather than threatening, flashing smiles rather than sneers. The emphasis is on integration and camaraderie, as the presence of members from different Asian communities, and not only South Asians, exemplifies. The partygoers play cards and drink wine from stemmed glass, in elegant, discreetly furnished apartments. Little expensive jewelry is displayed, and nobody seems to be smoking a mere cigarette, let alone a reefer.



The lyrics deal with courteous love, rather than racial slurs, social, or sexual comments: 'My love, my darling, you're so beautiful, just a kiss from you will make me so happy, open the doors of your heart, give me your love and make me a happy man'.

What is taking place here is not the toughening of Indian American music by means of hip-hop to ensure better visibility and recognition for the community. On the contrary, it is rap that becomes infused with the gentleness and cheeriness of bhangra, a gentleness that mitigates rap's potentially threatening or intimidating elements. Even with the addition of hip-hop elements, *American Bhangra's* music suggests above all a typical, and once again probably stereotypical, Punjabi taste for joyful and innocent

partying, for romantic poetry, and for clearly defined and reassuring gender roles and community values. With its traditional melody, instrumentation, and lyrics, ‘Tere Ishq Soniye’ evokes a simple, yet rich, life where rituals and traditions still play a major role.

What is then suggested by the fact that bhangra and hip-hop are coming together on Indian, rather than African-American, terms? Recent scholarship on rap music has provided new insights into the genre. Rather than minority music, expressing the experience of marginalization, a rejection of white, mainstream norms, and a quest for a specific identity, it has been analyzed as betraying a desire for integration, for fitting in. The emphasis of the most popular forms of rap music is indeed on the basic components of mainstream American ethos: self-realization measured in terms of material wealth and physical power, and represented by the image of the hustler and the pimp, cars and drugs, sex and money. This turns it into an essentially American, rather than African-American, form. If the symbols rappers resort to definitely refer to what could be deemed African American folklore, both their original and contemporary usage can be construed as an attempt at adopting mainstream standards.

The new value attributed to rap music points to a different understanding of its incorporation into bhangra. Rather than suggesting a shared heritage of marginalization and a similar identity quest, it intimates a common desire for assimilation and integration, an acceptance of American principles and goals. But, the alteration of rap performed by bhangra musicians, removing crude or threatening allusions to sex, money, or racial issues, indicates that assimilation or integration will take place on a different basis, and with a different agenda from what the most vocal spokesmen of the African American community advocate. If like their African American counterparts, South Indian artists present Americanization as a coveted goal, they do not mean to achieve it at all costs.

Martin Stokes has suggested a classification of the impact of diasporic musical practices that may help us assess the scope of American Bhangra’s influence. He has divided this impact into two main categories: a unifying process, and an empowering one:

In diasporic situations, music indeed transforms space, in two ways: first, music *unifies* diaspora groups, in musical contexts where the homeland is semiotically conjured through musical sound. In its mediated forms, music also provides a means of diasporic communication between separate diaspora communities, so that, for example, Indians in New York are aware of what Indians in London or Trinidad are playing and saying, and vice versa. Secondly, music *empowers* diaspora groups by staking out a unique cultural space in the host nation, providing a voice for the marginalized community. (Stokes 1994: 4)

Let us consider this double transformation in greater detail.

1. The unifying process is particularly visible at the intra-community level. Bhangra allows the Indian diaspora to maintain some connection with the homeland.

Even if Sunaina Maira points out how Indian-Americans use a figurative *language* of return when visiting India, rarely intending to actually settle again in the country (Maira 1999: 29), she also underlines the significance of such language and how the 'myth of return' contributes to the sense of community experienced by South Asians.

Admittedly, it is a rather romantic and idealized image that is cherished, an image that William Safran precisely identifies as an essential component of diasporic identity (Safran 1991: 91). But even if this image blends childhood memories, stories told by the elders, and scenes taken from Bollywood movies, even if myth and imagination are often stronger than reality, there nevertheless remains the pride of belonging to an ancient and powerful nation. The talks we have conducted with members of the various diasporic communities, whether they originate from Punjab or Gujarat, whether they live in Vancouver, Chicago, or Austin (and the same would be true for Mauritius, Dubai, or Montpellier) confirm that for both first generation Indians and those born in host countries, bhangra is essential to the preservation of a symbolic and spiritual connection with India. This role has been made obvious by the strength of Bhangra societies on American campuses. They have popularized the complex and physically demanding steps of traditional Punjabi dances, sometimes combined with hip-hop moves, performed to the beat of *dhol* and *dholki* drums, and have organized increasingly popular bhangra competitions that enable their audiences to strengthen the physical, immediate bonds that tie them to their community.

Furthermore, as the video exemplifies, American forms of bhangra manage to unite most threads of the diaspora, regardless of geographic, ethnic, religious, or linguistic origins. Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Christians, or Jews, users of Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, Oriyâ, Urdu, or Marâthî have, sometimes reluctantly, adopted bhangra as a common denominator. As George Lipsitz wrote about British artist Apache Indian, such artistic stances 'creates problems for nation states with their narratives of discrete, homogeneous, autonomous cultures, but solves problems for people who want cultural expressions as complex as the lives they live everyday' (Lipsitz 2005: 524). Maira confirms that the bhangra parties she attended were seldom disrupted by scuffles for ethnic or religious reasons (Maira 1999: 43). At worst, the ubiquity of bhangra may lead to a certain irritation at seeing Westerners assimilate anything coming from Indian to Punjabi practices. The British Indian film director Gurinder Chadha testified to the reaction of the community during the 'Desh Pardesh' Film Festival in Toronto: 'Everyone was fed up with Bhangra, and everyone was really cross that the people who had loud voices were Punjabis and that they were so loud and macho. People felt that this term 'Asian' had become Punjabi- identified' (Koshy 1996: 154). Bhangra is definitely not *the* music of *the* community, and many British Asian musicians not affiliated with the genre try to distance themselves from it (Hyder 2004: 71).

One could admittedly argue with Jacques Bouët, commenting about *world music*, that bhangra has lost most of its traditional functions, and that if it remains closely connected to weddings and New Year parties, its 'authenticity' may be questioned. It has often become mere background music for private functions or an evening out in town. There nevertheless remains sufficient trace of its unifying power to consider it with the generosity Julien Mallet or Bruno Messina apply to what they label 'young music' or 'the musical third'.

2. The empowering process, especially visible at the inter-community level, has much to do with what we said earlier regarding the incorporation of African American practices on Indian terms. To understand this point better, we shall resort to John and Ruth Useem's concept of 'third culture', as redefined by Jacqueline Warwick. From the Useems' basic definition applying to the children of British professors living in Pakistan, describing those who operate within more than one society at a time, she has extended and reversed the concept to the children of Indian and Pakistani immigrants in North America. The parents of these children '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' (Warwick 6). Thus, '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' (6). In the case of bhangra, these other immigrants have been for instance the Jamaicans of Britain, or in the USA, the African-American diaspora. The concept of third culture enables to grasp better the often problematic, or at least challenging, but also fortuitous situation of these children. Third culture children are brought up by families that cherish their homeland heritage, but they also grow up among the kids of the host country. Diethrich underlines the twin paradox of such diasporic identities:

On the one hand, Indian American youth are dependent on what they perceive as 'authentic' or 'traditional' homeland culture; it constitutes their sense of heritage, and distinguishes them as unique from other Americans. Yet at the same time, they are *threatened* by their homeland heritage, by stereotypes projected on them because of that heritage, or by restrictive customs with which they do not agree.

On the other hand, these youth, as Americans, depend on American/Western culture as a significant aspect of their experience and identity, but they are simultaneously threatened by the possibility of losing their distinctiveness and their heritage (Diethrich 2004: 111).

Thomas Turino concludes that most of the time, diasporic youth balance these threats and tensions through a process of *modernist reformism*, 'based on the idea that "a new culture", or new genres, styles, and practices should be forged as a synthesis of the "best" or "most valuable" aspects of local "traditional" culture and "the best" of foreign "modern" lifeways and technologies' (Turino 2000: 16), a case of third culture concept.

But American bhangra does not perform a mere synthesis of two cultures.

Admittedly, because it incorporates elements of Eastern as well as American cultures, it allows a growing fraction of Indian youth to position themselves in both, adopting the local one without forsaking their parents'. However, as cultural poachers, to use Michel de Certeau's phrase, they adopt just enough of rap to connect with Western, commercial culture, but they make sure that the poaching is perpetrated on their own turf, on their own terms, with their own values. Rather than a synthesis, American bhangra represents the transformation of an American idiom. Crucially, the African-American singer of the video is the guest of his Indian-American friends, rather than, as could have been expected, their host in their new country. American bhangra artists are not trying to leave the margin to reach the center. They are redefining the margins as they see fit, with the help of another formerly marginal idiom, making it a viable alternative to the unquestioned adoption of rootless, homogenized pop.

In the process, bhangra has gained a positive image than has spilled over onto the South Asian community. For, if according to Diethrich, 'by adopting images of blackness, [Asians] are pulled closer to the "cool" end of youth culture's social hierarchy' (Diethrich 2004: 113), this has in turn imparted Indian idioms a remarkable degree of hipness. The non-Asian Americans I discussed bhangra with, all agreed that South Asian music had become for them 'the epitome of cool'. Good bhangra dancers or DJs are now key ingredients for a successful party. Anglo Indian musician Bally Sagoo recalls:

Before you were embarrassed to blast an Asian tune in your car 'cos the people were looking, and now you want to blast that tune out and show people, say 'listen to this beat line' and 'listen to this track.' You know, I had to wind up the windows when I was blasting an Indian track a few years ago because it was, 'What's this sound?' Now it's like 'Wow, what's that sound?' (Sharma 1996: 91)

Susan Koshy claims the same empowering impact for Gurinder Chadha when she interviewed the British film director:

The most powerful symbol of the syncretic diasporic culture of the time was British Bhangra music [...] Bhangra identities created a space where it was possible to wear Indian clothes or talk Punjabi in public with flair and gave Chadha an empowering and enriched sense of the possibilities of being Punjabi, black, and British. Her first film *I'm British, But...* was made through the New Director's initiative in 1989 and uses British Bhangra music as a metaphor for the syncretic nature of British Asian identity. (Koshy 1996: 149)

Hip bhangra clubs have opened in New York, Chicago, Seattle, or Los Angeles, enrollment in bhangra classes on campuses is up, and fitness clubs resort to bhangra music for their aerobics routines. Even more telling, numerous TV commercials (for colas for instance) now feature actors from the subcontinent and bhangra music. Suleman Mirza, who came second at *Britain's Got Talent* 2007 contest in Birmingham is of Indian origin and his routine blended, on a background of bhangra music, a pastiche of

Michael Jackson and a duet with a Sikh dancer. Even African American musicians have rejuvenated their own styles and boosted their street credibility by drawing on bhangra, such as Missy Elliot in 2001 with 'Get U Freak On', (*Miss E... So Addictive*), which reached the third place in US charts, or Jay-Z in 2003 with 'Mundian To Bach Ke' (Beware of the Boys), a cover of a 2003 hit sung in Punjabi by Lab Janjua and remixed by Punjabi MC in 1998 on his *Legalized* album. The song also reached the third place in American charts, the first one in Italy and Belgium, and the second in Austria and Germany. Even Britney Spears tried her hand at South Asian music in 2004 with 'My Prerogative'. To some extent, then, bhangra has allowed young diasporic Indians to experience the same inversion of perspectives black Americans or Arabic French youth underwent when ghetto-connected practices, be it musical, sartorial, or linguistic, became *de rigueur* among white teenagers.

By branching out towards rap, bhangra suggests a more subtle and complex definition of identity in diasporic contexts than had previously been assumed. It may constitute the blueprint for a new, more balanced relationship not only between host and diasporic cultures, but also between the center and the margins. Bhangra justifies Ulf Hannerz's point of view, for whom 'today's periphery will be tomorrow's center' (Hannerz 1993: 213). From both a sociological and spatial perspective, this is precisely what is happening with bhangra.

American bhangra is not like reggae, which incorporated rock music, at Island Records manager Chris Blackwell's suggestion, in order to make Bob Marley's music more acceptable to white ears. It is not either comparable to the electronic versions of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's Qawal produced by Peter Gabriel to reach a larger audience. In bhangra's case, the South Asian community is both the origin and the target of the syncretic process that saw it absorb hip-hop, the sounds and practices of another community from the margin. But as Vijay Mishra suggested to me during the 2009 Montpellier Conference where the oral version of this paper was given, and as the study of American Bhangra's video has proved, what happens with bhangra is radically different from what took place in the African American community. African American music could be described as a case of 'organic hybridity'. The contacts between African practices and European, Caribbean, and native American artistic forms led to the emergence of organically hybrid, syncretic music, that came to be associated with the United States at large, and eventually conquered the world under the name 'rock'. Admittedly, the language of hybridity is problematic, and should be used with caution, be it only because 'rather than challenging cultural essentialism, it actually places it itself at the heart of such discourses where "pure" and distinct identities are privileged and where cross-cultural dialogues could be interpreted as damaging fractures' (Hyder 2004: 15). Nevertheless, it is a useful one, helping at least to challenge the notion that African-

American and Indian identities are pure and separate.

What happens with bhangra is a much more conscious process than the one underwent by black music, that could be labeled 'intentional hybridity'. The adjunct of black elements is not the accidental outcome of a shared heritage, yielding unexpected new musics. It is on the contrary the deliberate, calculated selection of specific elements, chosen for their sonic and visual impact, and their role as identity markers. However, if the result of intentional hybridity may be pleasant, if it may contribute to redefine the place of the margin, if it may seduce Western as well as Eastern ears, and at the same time unite and empower the Indian diaspora, it could also be an aesthetic dead end. Until it reaches the 'organic' stage, it will hardly produce anything as sweeping and as powerful as the various forms of African American music. Accordingly, the marginalization American bhangra may suffer from is different from the othering process British bhangra has been submitted to in Britain, as an antiquated form of music, fit only for the Asian community. In the United States, it is bhangra's sheer intentionality, its calculated hybridity that might preclude the emergence of truly original forms. Nevertheless, the advent of American bhangra may have far reaching consequences. It may contribute to not only challenge the lack of recognition the Indian diaspora had hitherto experienced (Paul Gilroy's early failure to acknowledge the existence of an Asian diaspora, for instance), but also to establish this diaspora as more than the mere 'intersection in the creation and development of new syncretic identities' (Hyder 2004: 24). As a musical form much less syncretic than British bhangra-house and bhangramuffin, American bhangra could be instrumental in the emergence of a distinct South-Asian identity on American soil.

Thanks to Smita Motilal for her help with Punjabi lyrics.

Works Cited

- Brah, Avtar. 'Difference, diversity, and differentiation'. *'Race', Culture and Difference*. Donald, James & Ali Rattansi, eds. London: Sage, 1992; 126-148.
- Clifford, James. 'Diasporas'. *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (Aug., 1994): 302-338.
- Diethrich, Gregory. 'Desi Music Vibes: The Performance of Indian Youth Culture in Chicago'. *Asian Music* Vol. 31, No. 1 (Autumn 1999 - Winter 2000): 35-61.
- Diethrich, Gregory. 'Dancing the Diaspora: Indian Desi Music in Chicago'. *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities*, Thomas Turino and James Lea, eds. Detroit: Harmonie Park Press, 2004; 104-115.
- Dudrah, Rajinder Kumar. 'Cultural Production in the British Bhangra Music Industry: Music-Making, Locality, and Gender'. *IJPS* 9:2 (2003): 197-229.

- Hannerz, Ulf. *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Hyder, Rehan. *Brimful of Asia: Negotiating Ethnicity on the UK Music Scene*. Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate Publishing, 2004.
- Khan, Imran. 'Dragon Rising', *Second Generation*, Issue 7, (1997): 16-34.
- Koshy, Susan. 'Turning Color: Gurinder Chadha'. *Transition* 72 (1996): 148-161.
- Lipsitz, George. 'Immigration and Assimilation'. *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*, David Brackett, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005; 524-527.
- Maira, Susaina. 'Identity Dub: The Paradoxes of an Indian American Youth Subculture (New York Mix)'. *Cultural Anthropology*, 14-1 (1999): 29-60.
- Mallet, Julien. 'Ethnomusicologie des jeunes musiques'. *L'Homme, 'Musique et Anthropologie'* 171-172 (juillet-décembre 2004): 477-488.
- Messina, Bruno. 'Le tiers-musical'. *Filigrane* 5 (2007): 165-177.
- Modood, Tariq. 'Political Blackness and British Asians', *Sociology*, 28/4 (1994): 859-876.
- Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Black Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.
- Safran, William. 'Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return'. *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 83-99.
- Sharma, Sanjay. 'Re-mixing Identities: Off the Turn-Table'. *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, Sanjay Sharma et al., eds. London: Zed, 1996; 81-104.
- Stokes, Martin, ed. *Ethnicity, Identity and Music*. Providence: Berg, 1994.
- Tölölyan, Khachig. 'Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Movement'. *Diaspora, A Journal of Transnational Studies* 5/1 (1996): 3-36.
- Turino, Thomas. *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music in Zimbabwe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Turino, Thomas and James Lea, eds. *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities*. Detroit: Harmonie Park Press, 2004.
- Warwick, Jacqueline. 'Can Anyone Dance to this Music?: A Study of Toronto's Bhangra scene'. *Bansuri*, vol. 12 (1995): 5-17.