

## Bhangra

Bhangra is given some descriptive space in Peter Manuel's work, *Cassette Culture*: “..Noteworthy among Punjabi folk-music genres are narrative ballads (*Hir*, *Mirza Sahiban*, *Sohini-Maiwal*, *Sassi-Punnu*, etc.), women's genres like *giddha*, and *bhangra*, which accompanies a vigorous male dance performed at the vernal *Baisakh* festival (in April) and at weddings and other occasions. All these genres are especially associated with the *jar* cultivator caste, which comprises some three-quarters of the Punjabi population (of all religions).”<sup>1</sup>

Bhangra is identified as one of the musics in the Indian community in Singapore: *The Sikh community is known for its bhangra music and dance, a genre said to have originated in Punjab and performed during Sikh weddings, harvest and other joyous occasions. Traditional bhangra is usually accompanied by the thundhi (some writers refer to a thumbi) and dhol (drums), while the pop bhangra, popular in several clubs in Singapore, features electric keyboard, drum and guitar.*<sup>2</sup>

The description here is both informative and tantalising. This attempt at recounting the presence and practice of bhangra draws on both oral interviews with practitioners as well as literature on bhangra. Moreover, it is our express intention to concentrate on the local praxis first.

### Brief Chronology

An understanding of the emergence of Bhangra in Singapore is necessarily prefaced by an understanding of the Sikh community which is pieced together from at least two sources. Further research will be required for a more exhaustive investigation into its practice in proliferation. The first source by Surjan Singh<sup>3</sup> suggests that the first Sikhs to arrive in Singapore were Bhai Maharaj Singh and Bhai Kharak Singh in 1850 as political prisoners, interned at Outram prison. This roughly corresponds to the 1849 annexing of Punjab by the British in India. Records also indicate the presence of a private police force known as the **Dock Police** in about the 1870s; some Sikhs were employed by the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company. These Sikhs had their barracks in Tanjong Pagar where they had a small sacred site or gurdwara. In 1881, 165 Sikhs were recruited to form the Sikh contingent of the Straits Settlement Police Force in Singapore adding considerably to a very scarce Punjabi population.

The second is in the Khalsa Association report<sup>4</sup> where its history is traced to the efforts of a group of determined persons from Raffles Institution. The result was

the Sikh Sports and Cultural Association. Khalsa Association bears the date of existence as 1931. Its efforts were primarily to look after the welfare of its members. Its presence in Singapore statistical information is listed at 0.064% of the population in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to 0.63% in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> The interviewees in this project indicated that their parents arrived from India and worked as watchmen, trying to improve their financial position in Singapore, often holding down two jobs.<sup>6</sup> A major support system was the Gurdwaras or the temples.

Oral accounts from older practitioners in Singapore seem to have a more traditional view of Bhangra which as they believe...*in India...was usually performed after the harvest...people in the village used to work very hard towards a harvest...and this also coincides with Baisakh...good crops...good pay...celebration...liquor, drums, good food, instruments...that is what it was like in India.*<sup>7</sup> There was an approximate site in Kampung Sungei Seletar that proved fruitful for a community known as the Bihari Dairymen that survived into the middle of the 1980s before they were resited.<sup>8</sup> However, it is unlikely that an entire Sikh community might have found a similar village setting in Singapore. Moreover, their presence in Singapore would not have meant looking for alternative agrarian sites.<sup>9</sup> Almost by default, the gurdwara seems to have been the site for at two encounters which would have been instrumental towards an understanding of Bhangra in Singapore. Since the gurdwara was essentially a sacred site, the use of the voice for the incantations as well as for singing holy songs, required the use of specific musical instruments like the tabla, the harmonium and sitar besides the voice. It is not clear if there were any further instrumental requirements but a photograph in the Khalsa Association book describing the late 50s and early 60s indicates the presence of at least these three instruments.<sup>10</sup> The temple was also marked by another site in the outer reaches of the temple where the kitchen was located and food was served. This outer space also had with it additional space for people to interact. During **mela**, or gatherings, this space would serve as a site for interaction among fellow Sikhs and their families as well as activities that came during festivals which included kabbadi, gusti and a host of other activities. Given the absence of a dedicated space for festivities, the external temple grounds were more likely to have been early sites for social activities. Tai-yong elaborates, *The Sikhs established their gurdwaras in areas where they were concentrated to meet their spiritual and other needs. The Sikh gurdwaras were not only places of worship but functioned also as community centres where social, education and other charitable activities were carried out. This latter function was particularly crucial for the migrant Sikh community as gurdwaras provided a rendezvous where fellow Sikhs could gather to discuss affairs of their community or events in India as well as to aid newly-arrived migrants to adapt to their new environment.*<sup>11</sup>

The setting up of Khalsa was preceded by the formation of a Sikh Cultural Club in Singapore (Singapore Sikh Cultural Club) by four Sikhs from Raffles Institution in 1927.<sup>12</sup> Khalsa itself was established in 1931. Some distance would have passed between its formation and the presence of a dedicated social space for Punjabi mela of which the first to be advertised in public space appeared in the 1961 poster; the fruit of a year's labour by the Cultural section of Khalsa. A first site that was set up at Jalan Bahagia seems to have been the appropriate space and later at Tessenssohn Road.<sup>13</sup>

An early poster of a Punjabi **Mela** dated 1961,<sup>14</sup> shows two persons, the first in a dance pose with one of his ankles strapped with little bells; and another with a **dhhol** strapped around his neck and shoulders. That 1961 poster carrying this advertisement would have been easily described today as bhangra was subsumed under a caption Punjabi Mela. Yet the picture of a dancer responding to a dhol instrumentalist made for a unique signifier in Punjabi culture. Curiously, it came across as just another of a whole range of exciting events organised by the cultural section of Singapore Khalsa. This first Punjabi mela, as an organised event in 1961, becomes a watershed for both Khalsa and Punjabi Culture and perhaps even bhangra. At the time, however, the songs and dances were not identified as bhangra nor were they singled out. The songs and dances shared its space with a variety of other robust and physical activities, including martial arts.

But what if the bhangra marker was used only figuratively? Did Bhangra exist at the time? All we had was a poster not of real people but perhaps an attraction that would serve its only purpose; to do no more than attract. If that was the case, what do we make of the item songs and dances? Given this relative absence, we begin with oral accounts. There was a Bhangra group according to oral interviewees developed across Malaysia and Singapore through the efforts of a Mr. Seva Singh. Surjan Singh identifies Seva Singh Ghandharab as a very accomplished singer of Gurbani, or Sikh hymns.<sup>15</sup> His contributions to cultural activities and temple activities are largely known from the post war period and there was much he initiated to encourage the young to participate in cultural activities. In fact Seva Singh played an active role in the People's Association Cultural Section. Baldev Singh remembers being told that Seva Singh ran a group across Peninsula Malaysia.<sup>16</sup> When Singapore became independent, Seva Singh arguably took charge of or was charged to look after the Singaporean side. With members leaving for a variety of reasons, this bhangra group is said to have mustered support through Mr Seva Singh's immediate and extended family. Sarwan Singh remembers that this post-Independence bhangra group *was started by an elderly man here called Seva Singh<sup>17</sup>...he used to do a lot of singing of holy songs at temples...he used to play a couple of Punjabi musical instruments...he got a (Bhangra) group going which was more family*

*group...they did participate at National Day celebrations...the period I am referring to is around the late 1960s and early 1970s....then in the late 1970s...one of our troupe members...Shokdarshan Singh was in Seva Singh's group...this group was slowly dying out...so Shokdarshan Singh came out and formed Dharam Veer. This group was reportedly formed in late 1977 and early 1978....we chose the name Dharam Veer which stands for Blood Brothers... I joined the group in 1981/2.*<sup>18</sup>

According to Sarwan Singh, Dharam Veer comprised the following persons:<sup>19</sup>

Shokdarshan Singh (from Seva Singh's group)

Sarjit Singh (from Seva Singh's group)

Sardol Singh

Sarwan Singh

Gucharan Singh

Saranjit Singh (now the owner of Roshni and Chandini Restaurants)

Tarcholan Singh

Sukhdev Singh

Darshan Singh

Baldev Singh (transition between DV and DV2)

## Bhangra as Dance

Britannica Online informs us that Bhangra *is performed on all festive occasions, particularly at sowing and harvest celebrations. The brightly dressed villagers dance vigorously in a large circle, accompanied by powerful drumming and also by clapping and singing. Dancers in pairs give spontaneous solo displays that include virile jumps.*<sup>20</sup> An article ascribed to Wikipedia offers a little more: *The dance...graduated to being performed on almost every Punjabi social occasion...the exclusively male dancers dress in bright colourful attire made primarily of a white shirt, a cloth wrapped around the waist (called lungi) and a turban. A performance is normally accompanied by singing and most significantly, the beat of the dhol and an instrument reminiscent of an enlarged pair of tongs called **chimta**. The accompanying songs are small couplets written in Punjabi called Bolis. They related to celebration, love, patriotism, or current social issues.*<sup>21</sup> Charanpal Singh's interviews on the third generation Punjabis

in Singapore identify one such function of a **boliyan** by **DCS** to make a poignant yet ironic call for home.<sup>22</sup>

From the oral accounts, interviewees could more or less be distinguished by their affinity for two aspects of bhangra; those who are interested in the dance and those interested in the music. For those who were keener on the dance, *Bhangra is a very robust dance...it involves the movement of your ankles and shoulders...mostly the lower legs...actually the whole leg, the knees and shoulders...that makes your movements differentiate between each step and all that.....and also the movement of the shoulders is very important...because when the upper body doesn't remain still...you have too much movement at the lower body and not much at the upper body...you need the shoulder movement to create the motion of the upper body so as to balance the overall body movement...Bhangra is mostly a rhythmic dance...once we pick up a song...we think of the choreography of the steps with the song...we go through with the song, we see what is good, where we can come in, where we can put in the steps...and slowly we build up on the song with the different steps and all that....that normally can take a week, two or even three weeks depending on how creative we are...once we have all the steps for the whole song...our practice session goes into time, rhythm, perfection of steps, when you're dancing, the steps are going to be together, coordinated,...that takes another 2-3 weeks...to get it down...in between...some of the steps...when we put it in doesn't coordinate with the rhythm too much...try to adjust them a bit here and there and we get the whole thing...once we have the whole thing formed together within 4-6 weeks...everything...then we go for perfection...we just practice for perfection and memory of the steps by hearing the rhythm....change of the rhythm, change of the steps.....we get into that....once we are on stage we do not depend on fellow dancers....it becomes too obvious if you are looking at your fellow dancers and their steps.....when you are dancing on the stage, you are hearing the rhythm, the music and everything that you must know yourself by then...you must know when you are changing the steps...everybody follows that same rhythm of changing, when to change a step, when to break a step...when to coordinate....and all that....this is the result of all these practices...and if we all agree this step is right, then we carry on with it....if we think this step is not right, then we think of something else....what other different movements or steps we can do, what variations we can put into a step....it is a group effort.<sup>23</sup> For musicians Sarwan explained...it goes with the rhythm of the music This is most evident in the configuration of the instruments...in Bhangra we have the **chimta**...a clapper...makes a maracas sound..then there is the **dhol** or **dholki** (smaller dhole)...Bhangra is a dance relying on the beat of the dhole which is played by sticks...normally begins on a slow beat.....and starts slow...and as it goes shorter the beats become faster.<sup>24</sup>*



The Dhol is a bulky barrel-shaped percussion instrument with roots in Indian province of Punjab played mostly as an accompanying instrument to the traditional Punjabi dance of Bhangra. The open ends of the dhole are fit with patches of animal hide or given present technology, mylar, stretched over its open ends and covering them completely. These patches can be stretched or loosened with a tightening mechanism made up of either interwoven ropes, or nuts and bolt. Tightening or loosening this can change the characteristics of the sound of the drum. The stretched animal hide on one of the ends is thicker and produces a deep low frequency (higher bass) sound and the other, thinner one produces a higher frequency sound. The drum is played using two wooden sticks, one for each end of the drum. Of the two, the heavier, more rigid stick called the **dhaga**<sup>25</sup> is used to play the bass side of the drum is a bit thicker (roughly about 10 mm in diameter) and is bent in a quarter-circular arc on the end that strikes the drum. The other playing stick is much thinner and flexible and used to play the higher frequency end of the drum and is known as the **thili**.<sup>26</sup> While playing, the drum is slung over the neck of the player with a strap usually made up of ropes or woven cloth. The surface of the wooden barrel is in some case decorated with engraved or painted patterns.<sup>27</sup>

## Bhangra as Music/Textual considerations

Peter Manuel refers to traditional *bhangra*, which is primarily instrumental, having only occasional shouted vocal stanzas **bolis**.<sup>28</sup> In the local context, Sarwan Singh refers to **Boliyan** as *choruses of songs...it's a chorus of 5-6 lines....where you describe certain things.....in a wedding or something or some situation....its very rhythmic...Usually this text is taken from people who know how to put words together....somebody can come out with something which rhymes and that's alright...boliyan is actually very short phrases of a song....from India....its a folk-thing...separate from bhangra...normally sung at engagements and weddings...when ladies get together...its short and sharp...describe the wedding boy and girl....you can even tease the couple, couple's parents, parents-in-law...just for the fun of it...its humorous...you only need a dhol...and chimta...today they just use a tambourine...simple instruments...tabla...those are the thing...also you need singers...actually singing boliyan is not a very difficult thing to do...you listen...and you pick it up...the style and the manner and way it must be done...is already built into the Punjabi culture...sung only by women...Usually,...but men can also sing it...after the women...this tradition is based on creating a humorous situation...for fun and enjoyment....it comes into weddings and engagements...its entertainment...and the **boliyan** can be used here as well....its something that can be used for any occasion<sup>29</sup>...but here in Singapore, people like to hear Indian, Hindi and Punjabi music mixed so we don't often use the dhol...we use songs from film...<sup>30</sup>*

## Repertoire

Manuel's study of Bhangra in the postwar decades in North India inform us *Punjabi non-filmi popular music emerged as a dynamic regional tradition. The various duet and solo songs recorded by Asa Singh Mastana and Surinder Kaur were particularly appreciated for their tuneful melodies and soulful, often philosophical lyrics. Other singers, such as Jamla Jat, Prakash Kaur, Madan Bala Sindu, Kuldip Maanak, and Mohammad Siddiq popularized similar newly composed songs using characteristic Punjabi modes, melodies, and rhythms; in doing so they promoted a modernized, slick kind of music which was at once distinctively Punjabi, and yet sophisticated and professional enough for middle-class urbanites to enjoy (Pushpa Hans, interview, January 1990).*<sup>31</sup>

Sarwan recalls the repertoire of his time when he visited his uncles' bhangra groups in KL....*I used to hear more folk music...folk bhangra music from India...K Deep Singh, Asa Singh Mastana, A.S.Kang, Kuldip Maanak, the late Harjit Gandhi...those days there were singers not groups... my uncle gave (these records) to my dad the LPs..... the big thick ones.....the picture of the dog...(78s)...I can't find any of that material now...*<sup>32</sup> Gurcharan Singh remembers his father taking the family to Odeon...Cathay...to see Hindi films like *Ganga Gemina* [sic] or *Leeder* [sic]...or those old Hindi pictures.<sup>33</sup> In Sarwan and Baldev's generation at **Dharam Veer**, the traditional singers ruled the day with lyrical lines laced with a catchy rhythm, arresting lyrics and melodies. Baldev describes some of the songs. *Chenchel's songs are taken and modified by a lot of UK singers...I was 8/9 years old when I listened to this Gurdas Maan...he sings the songs with the lyrics from Chenchel.....his songs are not famous but his lyrics are...Fateh Ali Khan...these ghazal guys take from him...these London guys they go to India...they get the lyrics from .... In India they are called amlis...they sit in one place and they can create....there are lots of people who take their lyrics...they come out with fantastic songs with wonderful meaning...the song Silly Silly Ondehe—the first few words are “a very slow breeze is coming from somewhere but I can hear a voice crying”...and if I am a singer and sit with them, I'd love to hear what they joke...they will take it and make in into their songs.....the best songs to me come from the amlis...they are not stoned (drunk)...they know what they are doing...I went to a place in Bombay called Ranjit Singh Tabar...there are two guys down there singing ghazals...singing Pankaj Udhas songs better then Pankaj Udhas...there is a famous song Chetty Ai Hare...(a letter arrived)... in this movie when Pankaj Udhas sang this song...I am sure any one in the cinema will cry...a very touching song with the lyrics...*<sup>34</sup>

Amar Singh, singer and band leader of his Hindi band, Roshni Jeevans, cites his influences: *Kishore Kumar, I love Mohd Rafi's songs...but I don't have the Rafi*

*voice...but I can sing Kishore Kumar songs...now I even sing ghazals...Pankaj Udhas...When Mohd Rafi passed away....then Pankaj Udhas came up....his songs are very pleasing to hear and meaningful... have a nice melody....the words are beautiful....and they are mostly on drinks....when they drink....they will glorify beauty...beauty of a woman....a lot of people like that and I get many requests...but I sang ghazal in Roshni Jeevans much later...*<sup>35</sup>

The late 1970s into the 1980s saw the transformation of bhangra into group configuration. In the UK, Harjit Gandhi, who had been making a career for himself singing at Indian weddings and parties in the mid 1970s went on to found a pioneer bhangra band called **Alaap** with Channi Singh. This group like all others that followed reconfigured their instrumentation to include singer/s, dhol, tabla, electronic organ, bongos, congas, bass guitar and tambourine.<sup>36</sup> By the 1980s, the repertoire that sustained the earlier group had been significantly altered by developments no longer from Punjab but the UK. Sarwan explains, *with migration....they brought their culture....in other countries....today...bhangra today is a mixture of samba, African drums....Indian drums....this was done in the 1980s in the UK....we had a lot of Punjabis in Africa who moved to the UK...that is how the first group in the UK, Alaap started....they were Indians from Africa and UK...they came up with the combination of African, Western and Indian instruments...and applied it to Punjabi songs...and all that....and they started this form of bhangra...* Other UK groups that became the repertoire base were **Apna Sangeet**, **Premmi** and **Heera**...in effect the disco beat in the bhangra and hence the label disco bhangra. This configuration also marked a change in listening preferences. According to Swapna Ghosh and Santha Oorjitham, *Bhangra was reincarnated by a Punjabi performer in London, Apache Indian, who about a decade ago (late 1980s) mixed bhangra with reggae to get "bhangramuffin". Since then it has been mixed with rap, rock, pop, even techno.*<sup>37</sup> Notable names like **Gurdas Maan** whose **Apna Punjab Hove** has become a sort of anthem for Punjabis around the world even in the discos of today,<sup>38</sup> the lately departed **Surjit Bindrakhia** for whom it was said that as with *a stage dance on his song, Malang Baaniye*, he could carry a whole song with just a dhol, a tumbi, and his voice and it could be a crossover pop hit, just by the way he sang it. His latest album *Ishqee di agg* was also a typical Bindrakhia masterpiece with *"teth panjabi" mixed with nice beats and meaningful lyrics*<sup>39</sup> and more recently **Daler Mehndi**<sup>40</sup> (who apparently managed to upstage Amitabh Bachchan), to name a few of the outstanding ones.

A more recent local practitioner, Ranjit Singh, considers the **Alaap** generation **old music** because today there are bhangra practitioners like, **Bad Boys** and **Sukhbir** not to mention Bollywood compilations, who are MCs and DJs more than actual performers and who have appropriated technological innovation for bhangra.



## Emergence in the Public Sphere

Oral interviewees suggest Bhangra in its earliest appearances seemed to make its way in two settings; the first is at Punjabi melas. At this event, bhangra formed part of an entire array of activities known to the Punjabi community. The second appearance seems to focus on bhangra as a unique expression of Punjabi culture. Seva Singh was already involved with the Peoples Association cultural section. Baldev remembers his first assignment after being drafted into Khalsa while he was in the SAF Boys school: *when I [just] joined the Bhangra group....we had a performance in Brunei...the birthday celebrations of the Sultan of Brunei.....in the plane I had to learn a traditional Punjabi song (its about the way in which the dress fits snug into her attire)...when I got off the plane....I performed in front of a huge crowd...the whole field was as large as our Padang... there were four sides, one Muslim, Korean, one-Malay non-traditional and we were on the Punjabi, Eurasian and others...you know when the Bhangra begins all the focus will shift here....so I sang and all that, played the drum...at that time I couldn't play with the stick....so I used my bare hands....after the show my hands were double with swelling...slowly I learnt the sticks and I can do the sticks now....but when I played with bare hands, I was louder than those with sticks....One activity I helped with was the training of a group of Chinese, Indians and Malays from the PA to perform bhangra on board a ship it was called the Youth Ship and the troupe had to be on board for quite a few months...we personally could not go...so Gurcharan Singh, Sarwan Singh and I trained those who could go, Punjabis and non-Punjabis...we taught them how to put on the uniform and how to dress up and all that....we also taught the non-Punjabis as well...we even trained Punjabis in Changi...we went there to give them some lessons on Bhangra...we went to teach the prison-boys how to dance...I wasn't involved but others did...so they even had a Prison Bhangra group....this was in the late 1970s...we have been involved in Chingay...a photo of my niece appeared in Newsweek or Asia magazine....one of these...her face was on the front...for me that was recognition for our culture...then I started bringing in live bands with giddha girls, bhangra boys and live band music...I performed in Perli...12 hours by bus...only one hotel...Pans Hotel...but 5 Star hotel...its quite good....they had a ballroom which could hold 200...the Menteri Besar appeared as guest for the show...it was arranged by a girl called Manjit Kaur who was secretary to the Menteri Besar...it was a fund raiser for temple renovations...we gave them the show....sold out...our President was so impressed that he declared a donation to the fund...then we did more shows like at Club Amaan in KL and so many others...live band singing...in 1978 I performed in National Stadium...we had an item signifying a wedding and we also had the Giddha girls...then we had a girl sitting in a special sedan carried by a group of people....and when we reached the ministers she pulled the curtain aside and waved to all and I was*

*playing the drum which was bigger than me...after that we started performing for a lot of charity shows...we also performed Bhangra for Ramakrishna Mission...we performed at the Japanese Gardens at the invitation of the Japanese Association and then they would have a special Festival of Lights...all these Japanese tourists will be taking photos...the Japanese gardens closed in the 1980s and our bhangra became more modern... in 1997/1998 Friday night at the Festival Market...we were given a slot (STPB)...so we were dressed up in full costume and we would carry on performing around the market...*<sup>41</sup>

Gurcharan Singh remembers:

*I did [perform at] Chingay, National Day 1975/6.....at the National Stadium....later on we got involved in the Festival of Arts...and then our groups performed in Brunei, Indonesia...and even Australia...so we carried on for almost ten years....then everybody started splitting and forming their own group.....Dharam Veer, DV2, BDS...and many other groups...some of these groups are working with PA...*<sup>42</sup>

Sarwan Singh recalls, we had cultural shows, cultural occasions, like Chingay, Indian Culture month, Deepavali, Christmas, contracts with Tourism Board...on certain performances....we performed at Sentosa from 7.30-8.00pm or something like that on the podium...½ hour performance weekly, and it was gazetted in the tourist culture events..... We have gone to Kampong Glam, Kolam Ayer, Pek Kio, Tanjong Pagar, Sembawang, Yishun,...all over Singapore....every CC used to promote cultural events during their calendar year....and they wanted to promote it and make their residents watch the performances...<sup>43</sup>

## Emergence in Commercial Endeavour

Among the pioneering effort of musicians, Amar Singh who plays and leads his band Roshni Jeevans, at functions and gigs, *we have the drums that can play the bhangra beat...Baldev can play dhole...but he is more interested in singing and dancing...so my son Bobby did it with the drum set.*<sup>44</sup> This largely suggests that when his band was doing gigs at a variety of events, he located an alternative sound with the drum-kit when a dhol-player was unavailable. As with developments in the UK, bhangra was to find itself curiously through negotiating the same space with other cultures. Sarwan Singh related one positive impact of negotiating bhangra in a totally different setting in the Singaporean context. *We did a contract at Brannigans at the Hyatt Hotel for a tea dance for two months, every Sunday 11am-3pm...Brannigans had a samba band there. What we did on Sunday was to bring in Bhangra and bhangra musical instruments and combined with the samba band for a unique mixture. We had a very good drummer by the name of Bobby Singh, Amar Singh's son,*

who was playing in Roshni Jeevans....he loved playing traditional instruments....I played tambourine....this samba and Punjabi traditional mix happened in the late 1980s....people who came looked forward to the Sundays....mixed crowd.....those who heard....told others and there were long queues....possibly 200/250.....you could see the long lines....in Singapore people come they see, they go back and talk about it.....this for me was good promotion for bhangra through other cultures...After this, we formed our own singing band....bhangra dance and singing band...Bobby was with us...the organist was an Indian-Muslim called Rahim.....tambourine...we had three singers....Baldev Singh, Iqbal and Johnny—they are Pakistani Punjabis...half of Punjab is in Pakistan....Bhangra is not only a Punjabi culture...it is a Pakistani, Muslim culture.....we had 10 dancers...we also saw that people liked live singing...we used to build this up together with entertainment for occasions....Punjabi Bhangra as well as Punjabi disco....because it is the youngsters we want to get involved with...<sup>45</sup>

A much younger Ranjit Singh found out the extent of his commitment: *the Bagpipers from PA were there and they needed a dhol and drum players to accompany their performance...they claimed that it went well with their bagpipes.....that's why our performers were at Jakarta...playing to a large expatriate audience...From 1983-1987, we did a lot of shows...Khalsa...a lot of CC shows....Khalsa recommended...we did for National Day, Chingay, one big event in Serangoon Road, Deepavali night...when I left DV, my group rehearsed at Whampoa CC...Moved into Whampoa in 1989/1990 until 1996, Rochor in 1997 then Kolam Ayer in 1998...up to now...My audience has been quite wide.....National Day, Live on 5 with Gurmit Singh...did a few shows from CC to entertainment companies....Whampoa CC was closing for renovation, so we moved to Rochore CC.....Malkit Kaur at Whampoa got my group a performance at Chingay.....from Rochor....at that point, I got my nephews...we became very famous...there were 20 of us for a 1 minute 30 second bit for the Chingay...fringe performance...then Rochor gave us an opportunity at Kolam Ayer...we met the IA group...there was one guy in the committee...who was with me at my first performance at Medan...and he welcomed us in...ever since, we have always done shows for Kolam Ayer CC...for four years, we do a lot of shows, performances for entertainment companies...CCs...we dance free for the CCs because we don't pay for the use of the premises...National Day, Lunar New Year, Hari Raya, Deepavali...1999 we were doing a two week show at Changi Transit lounge for Deepavali Night...we've done Ponggal...those days we carried cassettes, now we carry CDs... we have done Chingay and National Day shows four times through Kolam Ayer CC...National Day 1999 and 2002...we already started with bhangra in the schools...Westview primary School (2001—for the SYF) and Maha Bodhi Primary school (2002—towards the SYF).....they already had Chinese and Indian dance and wanted something*

*new so Bhangra came along... the primary schools won Gold medals...about 2003 we did something on the Jubilee Hall, we come out with traditional Bhangra dance, then Breakdance, then Indian dance....then all of us combined in one dance...*<sup>46</sup>

## Bhangra and support systems of everyday life

For many Punjabis in Singapore, Dharam Veer seems to be associated with the emergence of bhangra, particularly so in the 1970s and moreover, as a cultural group resident at the **Singapore Khalsa Association**. Dharam Veer has reportedly participated in many National events like National Day, Chingay Parade, Indian Cultural Month, performances at the opening ceremony of the South East Asia Games (if in the 1970s would have been 1973 with the commissioning of the National Stadium). Dharam Veer has performed in countries like Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand and Indonesia. Movies stars and singers from Bollywood have chosen the next generation of Dharam Veer, DV2 to perform for their concerts here in Singapore. The concerts of well known Malkit Singh in Singapore had also featured DV2. DV2 have also made its debut in movies, the most recent being a Pakistani movie entitled *Dewaaray*. Other groups like Jigiri Yaar (formerly the NCO Club Bhangra troupe), BDS an offshoot of DV2 and **Kohinoor** have all emerged in Punjabi space by performing for charity shows, weddings and even corporate functions gaining in experience in financial and cultural capital via contacts with various segments in commercial entertainment industry. No location seems to have been considered untenable; Singapore Turf Club, Senior Citizens Nite 2001.<sup>47</sup> Many of these bhangra troupes may be found presently find both structure and infrastructure in the various community clubs. Ranjit Singh, through BDS, is currently located at Kolam Ayer Community Club, having been at Whampoa CC previously. Sarwan Singh recalls...*We have gone to Kampong Glam, Kolam Ayer, Pek Kio, Tanjong Pagar, Sembawang, Yishun,....all over Singapore....every CC used to promote cultural events during their calendar year....and they wanted to promote it and make their residents watch the performances...*<sup>48</sup>

## Bhangra and issues of Authenticity

Mohd Rafee, a local Indian musician and composer who now works in the film music industry in India for the highly profiled A.R.Raman, made an interesting observation about bhangra when he was growing up in Singapore during the sixties. *Even when the Northern Indians had their major functions they would have bhangra and they danced or listened.* He noted the paradox: *Bhangra that came directly from India no one wanted to listen to...then when it came thumping...with the bass lines (from the UK)...then people listened...*<sup>49</sup>

Peter Manuel makes some telling observations:



*Punjabi pop music underwent a dramatic surge in creativity and popularity in the early 1980s, concurrent with the spread of cassettes. In musical terms the primary development was the emergence of pop or "disco" versions of so called bhangra, consisting of characteristically Punjabi vocal melodies set to bhangra's lively eight-beat kaherva meter, with various disco-derived percussion effects in the background. Aside from the rhythm and the accompanying dance style, the new Punjabi pop songs bore only a loose relation to traditional bhangra, which is primarily instrumental, having only occasional shouted vocal stanzas (bolis). Nevertheless, the faddish up-tempo dance music came to be called disco bhangra, and Punjabi pop music entered an unprecedentedly active and vital phase.*

What is regarded by Manuel as modern Punjabi popular music emerged more or less simultaneously in India and Great Britain. What is common to both is the dance dimension in it. The differences are on a very general level those of geography, culture and technology. The UK emergence was conditioned by an immigrant experience. Banerji and Bauman suggest that the coalescence of a hybrid music genre served to express a syncretic social identity that eventually became seen as Punjabi and modern, one could have thought almost simultaneously. The emergence of pop *bhangra* in Great Britain is dated specifically to 1984, when **Alaap**, a Punjabi immigrant folk-music band, released an LP *Tere chunni de sitare*, which, like the torrent of imitative subsequent releases, *was as genuinely Indian as it was recognizably disco*.<sup>50</sup> *Bhangra* groups subsequently proliferated throughout Punjabi immigrant communities, performing at nightclubs and at "day timer" concerts. In this context, animated social dancing engendered and encouraged spirited performances; countering a previously held view of Indians as shy and repressed members within the UK community. Although none of the groups were able to support themselves by music alone, the *bhangra* musical scene became quite active, with its own recording labels, radio programs, concert venues, and eventually curious attention from the mainstream pop media. South Asian grocery-store chains ended up purchasing distribution rights to many hit records so the musicians themselves profited relatively little. Moreover, the recording industry remained disorganized and plagued by piracy. Groups like **Heera** and **Holle Holle**, nevertheless, enjoyed star status among Punjabi immigrants, and the music grew in sophistication, building on *imaginative use of sampling techniques and high-tech synthesizers*.<sup>51</sup>

Punjabi pop music in India developed in a manner parallel to, although distinct from its British counterpart. As in Great Britain, the new music emerged as a syncretic hybrid, synthesizing disco rhythms and instrumentation with characteristically Punjabi modes, melodies, and *bhangra* meter. Similarly, it can be said to have evolved as a symbolic expression of social identity for Punjabis



(and especially the young) who had access to and become interested in modern Western culture, but who wished to retain some sense of Punjabi identity. Pure rural folk music was considered too old fashioned, plain, and backward, and Western pop music, although attractive, did not in any way affirm Punjabi identity. The consequence therefore, like many syncretic popular musics, was a practice developed as a felicitous creative fusion of old and new, rural and urban, and Western and indigenous. Although pirate cassettes of **Heera**, **Alaap**, and a few other British groups are found in Delhi markets, these bands are not well known in the Punjab proper particularly since concertising accounted for very little, by way of marketing strategies, in India.

At least two fundamental differences have been noted between the UK as new centre and the Indian (authentic) centre. Differences in the details of dance meter, choreography notwithstanding, Punjabi pop music is not commensurate with social dance or at least the way it developed in the UK. There is no tradition of social couple dance in Punjab; Manuel informs us that nor it is the case elsewhere in India. Manuel's observations are that at Punjabi weddings a few men may dance excitedly around the drummers, and occasionally a woman will dance a few steps, to applause and cheers from those standing by, before returning, giggling, to her *sahelis* (female friends). At stage shows by top performers, men often start dancing in the aisles or even on stage with the band, but there are no nightclubs in India where couples can dance to Punjabi music (or any music, except Western pop, in discotheques located in urban five-star hotels). Rather, the music is heard on cassettes and at weddings and other festivities where professional groups perform.

Secondly, with Punjab as point of origin, depending on perspective, some of the leading Indian performers, **Surender Shinda** and **Sardool Sikander**, empathise and emphasise rural Punjabi culture in their textual topics, stage attire, and audience orientation. Sikander, as Manuel points out, is from the *mirasi* caste, which traditionally provides music at rural weddings. In this environment, lyrics are very much an important facet of Indian-based Punjabi pop than in its UK-based counterpart, whose texts are generally short and insignificant, of the "Hey let's dance" variety.

The Indian songs, although fast and rhythmic, are meant more for listening and less for dancing. The emphasis on texts, they are thus much closer to the songs of **Asa Singh Mastana**, or, for that matter, to most of Punjabi traditional music, which, with the exception of *bhangra*, tends to be text-oriented. As such, the texts of Indian Punjabi pop songs are much richer, longer, and generally more interesting than those of the British groups; singers occasionally use lyrics of renowned writers like Shiv Kumar Batalvi, Amrit Preetam, and Prakash Sathi. Many songs, as mentioned above, are more or less ribald doggerel about *jija-*

*sali* relationships. Others, even those sung by urban performers, are in one way or another evocative of rural life, which remains the perceived hearth of Punjabi identity. Most songs are in some way suggestive of rural Punjabi attitudes, values hard work, hard play, humour, machismo, and a distinctive combination of earthiness and wistful philosophy. Quite a few songs deal with the inexhaustible topic of the interface of traditional and Western culture; a typical example is Dilshad Akhtar's "Desi bandri vilayati cheehan" (Native girl, foreign style) describing the familiar figure of the village girl returning from Great Britain who speaks an unintelligible mixture of Punjabi, Hindi, and English, and who is chased by the local men, revered by her girlfriends, and utterly exasperated by life in India.<sup>52</sup>

One name has dominated modern Indian Punjabi pop music scene; singer, poet, and actor **Gurdas Maan**. Maan was the seminal figure in the inception of the style in 1980-81, and remains the most creative, popular, and dynamic composer and performer. Photogenic, intelligent, and gifted with a fine voice and a charming stage personality, Maan offers something to everybody. Musically, his cassettes (generally produced by Charanjit Ahuja) contain the same slick, professional, harmonious fusion of Western pop and Punjabi ethos as do those of other leading performers like Surender Shinda. In some cases, his evocation of traditional culture is distinctively self-conscious, and deliberately intended to expose young Punjabis-via modernized pop music-to the richness of their traditional culture. A fine example is the commencement of his "Mela char din ka" (A festival of four days), where he sings a few poignant couplets of Waris Shah to the traditional melody of *Hir*, over a disco-type rhythmic accompaniment. Such expressive combinations of old and new, of Punjabi and Western, endear Maan to Punjabis of all generations and backgrounds, and, via cassette dissemination, have won him an audience vastly larger than that of Mastana or any other Punjabi performer. Maan is particularly celebrated for his lyrics, which, in the best folk tradition, deal with a wide variety of topics. Maan is explicit in his intent to comment on a broad spectrum of issues and sentiments, saying, "I try to present reality in my songs, not just love. How long can you go on presenting a man praising his sweetheart? So I look for new things" (interview, January 1990). His best-known songs have dealt with such subjects as the tragedies of Partition ("Chulla"), the hypocrisy of back-biting and gossip ("Chugliyan"), the conflicting values of urban youth and the older generations ("Mamla garbar hai"), and, perhaps above all, the meaning of *jat* identity in a changing world, typically presented with an affectionate humor. A typical example is **Thora thora hansna**; describing a husband slinking drunk into his house, and being set upon by his wife wielding a rolling pin:

*He ducks as she strikes, and she smashes the television. He shouts You've broken it! and she screams It was your fault for ducking!' If the Americans and Russians want to fight, they should use our Punjabi women.*<sup>53</sup>

Given the various changes that took place particularly in the 1980s and beyond, there is clearly a difference of the perception and reception of bhangra between the first offspring of resident Punjabis in Singapore and another generation that receives the world from a global perspective in terms of affirmation and influence. For most of the interviewees whose ages range from the late thirties to the fifties there is little empathy and understanding particularly when it involves the pop or disco bhangra. A clue to this difficulty is found in Ranjit Singh's responses to the shift from traditional to disco/techno bhangra. *There is a group **Bad Boys** and so many groups...**Saaqi**...**Sukhbir**...different from **Alaap**, **Apna Sangeet** and **Heera**...we have Bhangra Mix Vol. 1, Vol.2 Vol. 3...**Sukhbir** and **Bad Boys** are musicians...singers...so they bring in more musicians...electronic sounds ...And they use English words...while the old ones (**Apna Sangeet**) sang old songs...traditional nice songs...although we have never been to India, we can imagine what it sounds like through the songs...these people come from Punjab...have gone to the UK and brought with them their own tradition...*<sup>54</sup>

It is curious to imagine home in Punjab inspired by a Bhangra group based in the UK particularly if Singapore is geographically closer to Punjab than the UK....for the younger Ranjit, images of home were not drawn from what would logically have been an authenticated place; a Punjabi village. In drawing the distinction between two crucial components of bhangra, Ranjit's clarification reveals the distance between these two previously inseparable components of song and dance: *I observe the dance steps....the music is not my priority so I get the steps from India...We try to keep the traditional steps but have the Westernised music and try to keep the culture there...For BDS, I used Punjab steps but use UK music....*<sup>55</sup>

The demarcation between Bhangra as cultural dance and Bhangra as music can only be understood as a breaking down of its previous totality. Chanranpal Singh observes too the changes in consumption patterns *the primary flow of Bhangra from these locations to Singapore came in the 1980s when Bhangra CDs, vinyls and cassette tapes were imported and sold at shops, mainly in the Serangoon Road area.*<sup>56</sup> While there are differences in social impact and symbolic meaning of bhangra in comparing their consumption in the UK with consumption here in Singapore, the oral interviews themselves suggest a closer correspondence between Bhangra from the UK rather than Punjab and that choice is seen to be a difference between bhangra as dance-music and bhangra as music with text (albeit the danceable rustic rhythm).

The cultural section of Khalsa working with DJs to promote disco bhangra to persuade Punjabis to return to the cultural fold would have engendered the

perception that Top Ten and Fire and other discotheques had their hold prior to disco bhangra. Perhaps a clue here might have been its volume of consumption but that would require Music shops to reveal sales/volume figures of bhangra imports from the UK market. This requires a separate and more intensive search that lies beyond the scope of this exploration for the moment. By the late 1970s and early 1980s it is not difficult to imagine the impact of Saturday Night Fever on a community of youth particularly with musical rhythm. Given the explosion on the international front of Bhangra, Punjabi youth were less likely to have heard the earliest vibrations of pop-bhangra in the UK. By the 1990s, anything with Heera or Alaap would have been considered dated. Not surprisingly, Chanranpal recalls Bhangra artist Ranjit Kaur's view of Punjabi music as *really old and staid...it wasn't ours...hence the term Asian Kool coined by Bally Sagoo cool as in the western sense and distinctively Asian*.<sup>57</sup>

## The "Recovery" of Bhangra

If Bhangra were to offer some level of attraction via musical rhythm, it would have been very difficult to think of a traditional setting let alone its comparative lack of attractiveness. This difficulty was not likely to be won by a counter-revolution and evangelisation of the old value system. Sarwan Singh made this astute observation *by the mid 1980s we realised that many Punjabi girls and boys were going to English discos...Fire, Top Ten...all these famous places...we realised they were getting away from our Punjabi culture and music...so Singapore Khalsa Association set up a first...bhangra disco...If the English can have their own disco, so can the Punjabis, through disco Bhangra...bring the kids over to their side and let them hear our side.....they can have fun with our music....that is what we did...we put up a proposal...we got \$1500 to organise this event....it was a free event....they only needed to come here, listen to the music and enjoy themselves...we felt we could do better with our music than the English music...we had close to 1200-1500 youth attending...a real success...the money was well spent....after that we got feedback...and asked when there would be a second...so we said for the second, there would be a minimum charge of \$2 per person...the first event was covered by Khalsa...the DJ whom we hired, was willing to work with us...when we hired him, we told him we were not going to make money out of this event...we just wanted the Indian crowd to come back to Indian music and listen to what you are playing and be able to dance and enjoy...he was willing to work with us, he gave us a pretty good deal....we needed to cover him for his transportation and expenses...just do a simple....thing tea and drinks....but the second time, we charged \$2, plus we had \$2000 from Khalsa...we put up a stage here, for the DJ....big dance hall...food going on the second occasion also good turnout...same kind of numbers....money well spent...the success in bringing Punjabi kids back to Punjabi culture was mediated not by traditional Punjabi music and dance but actually disco bhangra and it was not from Punjab but the*

UK. Sarwan's response was *they came and danced and listened...they enjoyed it...they might not have understood what the words were all about...but the rhythm was good enough to get them...* Baldev believed that another age old battle needed to be won; *culture is not easy for Punjabis to get involved. Some parents don't like the place (Khalsa Association)...sometimes you get fights at weddings and all that...but they forget their kids don't know Punjabi culture...also worse may be happening in Orchard Road...so we even introduced Culture nights with bhangra nights with the DJ in the 1980s...to attract our children to come here...so we started this to pull our Punjabi kids out of town outlets and let them come here to Khalsa...when our kids meet in town, they might meet other kids who get involved in glue-sniffing or pills and other things...so we tried to organize a lot of of cultural programmes for our Punjabi culture...*<sup>58</sup> Ranjit Singh growing up in the 1980s has a different perspective, *for BDS, I used Punjab steps but use UK music... Punjabi steps and Punjabi music...its not exciting enough...slightly slower...their tempos....are also slower...westernisation actually has made Bhangra more lively...*<sup>59</sup> Yet he reiterated the care with which the choreography to ensure the steps to be conformed to.

## Bhangra and negotiation of cultural ideals

How was it possible for adherence to take place with the dance steps but not with the music? Sarwan offers his views: *if you ask me, I prefer the traditional way...that is what got me going in Bhangra...but then again...you have to find out what the kids are tuned to...and its not bad music....its something bad I won't even promote it....the kids like it...its still within the Indian culture....Punjabi songs...In Singapore, you go to the discos, they are playing disco bhangra.....in 1980s....one of the songs sung by Alaap or Premmi...they hit the UK charts...no.4 in the UK Charts....that song was played in every disco after that...in those days, you walked into Singapore discos...you could hear that song at least twice...And that's the beauty of it...able to adapt to the new environment and still call it bhangra...when I go occasions and weddings, I see Punjabi and Indian kids dancing to our music...I feel proud of it... we are still looking to adapt to the new generation.....we cannot say that the old is still the best way...those days were the old days and those were our limitations...today our limitations are different because the possibilities are vast...we cannot lock ourselves into that small corner and ignore that vast land of opportunity...*<sup>60</sup>

In a strange sort of way, bhangra from the UK rendered Punjabis in Singapore the sort of rejuvenation traditional versions could not have at the initial stages. Charanpal's respondents indicate a resurgence in things Punjabi with the remixing of bhangra with other 'western' elements.<sup>61</sup> It is however, debatable



whether this will lead Punjabis back to Punjab in a way only understood by the first wave of migrants. Even then, bhangra has become so popular that the current selections of bhangra not only arrive from Canada, Australia and the United States but also Bombay. Gurcharan Singh observes the change *everybody sees this film, they want to follow and take up the steps...[in] every Hindi film there is at least one bhangra.*<sup>62</sup> Ranjit also points out that in the Singaporean context, there are factors which allow for bhangra to intermingle with other rhythms...*about 2003 we did something on the Jubilee Hall, we come out with traditional Bhangra dance, then Breakdance, then Indian dance...then all of us combined in one dance.*<sup>63</sup>

For Gurcharan Singh, the next step is to create an environment that will see a smoother flow of cultural negotiation between traditional and the current cultural re-mixed version of bhangra...*at present we have an instructor from Punjab, India...Molok Singh (reportedly from Chandigaar University, India)...he is teaching Punjabi folk dance...he coached the boys and girls on the folk dance steps...and then the boys came to complain...why like that...the folk dance is very tiring...so I told them that the folk dance steps is different...1/2/3/4...and the steps are different...I told them don't complain, just learn it...If you go to a village (in Punjab) they will see things differently...if they see our modern bhangra, they will say it is like monkeys jumping up and down...but in a Punjabi village you don't know what pictures there are...for them if they can hear the music, they say it is the music of bhangra but we have listened to other things as well...you know Indian foreign workers in Singapore, when they see our bhangra they say this is not the real one.... Because the new bhangra is from the UK and for DJ's this new bhangra is disco dancing.*<sup>64</sup>

There are also other forces at bay. Some more recent attempts have been bhangra-aerobics, or bhangra in combination with other dance forms, to name only two forms of fusion. Suffice to say that the music is no longer in a position to determine issues of authenticity else it will require the attractive force of a musical person or group to lead the Punjabi community towards retaining their unique identity while acknowledging the irony of the means. It is therefore extremely difficult to determine the place of authenticity for music or dance associated with Bhangra. In its present state, it is likely Bhangra will have to negotiate that tension between the older identity of Punjabi folk dance and the global desi-beats. It is not our place to be able to predict an outcome of this negotiation; nor predicate the most appropriate strategy that will enable Bhangra to garner an identity at once Punjabi and at once cosmopolitan. Quite clearly, the sites of contestation and manner of performance will continue till at some point, there emerges a unique enough expression to be identified as Singaporean, if only because it is practised differently than anywhere else in the world.

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- 8 Yeo Chor Siang, *Continuity and Change among Singapore's Bihari Dairymen: the Kampung Sungei Seletar Community*, pp.104-156, in Anthony R. Walker (ed.), *New Places, Old Ways*, Hindustan Publishing Corporation 1994.
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- 12 Ibid.
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