

### III Chronological History – Bhangra and its Origins

#### What is Bhangra?

Bhangra is a term used to define the music and to a lesser extent dance, that originated – hundreds of years ago - in the Punjab region of South East Asia, a region currently extending over part of Northern India and North Eastern Pakistan. Translated, the name “Punjab” means the “land of five rivers” so called because of the five rivers that flow through it, the Beas, Chenab, Jeelum, Ravi and Sutlej. Due to this, the region has extremely good soil and is therefore considered ideal farming land.

The term bhangra has been translated in a number of ways, some comment that it derives from 'bhang', a word used in India and abroad that is connected to hemp and cannabis, in particular herbal cannabis, but earlier used more specifically, as B. R. Deodhar explained in Pillars Of Hindustani Music (Popular Prakashan, Bombay 1993), to mean 'cannabis usually ground and mixed with milk, sugar and dry fruit'. However, in Far East, (1945, Batsford, republished as Indian Diary And Album, Open University Press, 1991), Cecil Beaton described the ‘concoction of milk, almonds, rosewater, cardamom nuts and eight ingredients of which hashish, or Bhang, was the principal.’ (‘One of the effects of Bhang’, he further reported, ‘is that it makes everything appear humorous. Another is that strange things happen to one's sense of time’). The word bhang itself stems from the Sanskrit word bhaṅgā, being the drink you get when you order a ‘special’ lassi in certain parts of India. The word in turn is a derivative of the verbal root ‘bhanj,’ perhaps originally ‘bhranj,’ meaning to break, or dissolve from which we get the German ‘brechen’ and English ‘break’. In Sanskrit we also find (the related) ‘bhangura’ meaning ‘apt to break, fragile, transitory, perishable, bendable, curled, crisp, fraudulent, dishonest.’ We can therefore see that the exact origins and basis for the term bhangra is therefore not fully known.

The people of the Punjab are called Punjabis and their language is Punjabi. The three main religions in the area are Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. The region has been invaded and ruled by many different empires, including the Aryans, Greeks, Mongols, Muslims, and Persians. Around the time of the 15th Century, Guru Nanak Dev founded the Sikh religion, which quickly came to prominence in the region. The 19th Century saw the beginning of British rule, which led to the emergence of several freedom fighters and the subject of a number of Bhangra songs (see below).

Finally, at the end of British rule in 1947, the Punjab region was split between Pakistan and India. The trauma and upheaval of partition resulted in the large migration of Punjabis to the UK, which eventually led to the emergence of Bhangra in Western clubs and society. See below for more detailed information on this, since knowledge of Punjabi history offers important insights into the meaning and background of the music.

Bhangra began in the Punjab as a folk dance and music associated with the Vaisakhi festival to celebrate the harvest. However, over the years bhangra became a key element of occasions as diverse as weddings, birthdays and get togethers such as New Year celebrations.

**BHANGRA ... as it was and as it is...**

Gursharan Chana

The origins of Bhangra as a form of music and dance go back many centuries, but cannot be put down to a specific time when the sound of Bhangra became the music of the people of the Punjab. The sound of Bhangra has primarily come about through the roots of Punjabi folk music. This was the music of labourers and farmers of the small but very active villages that grew the majority of the sugar cane and wheat in India. Even now the majority of food grown in the Punjab is sugar cane and wheat but

also spinach, potatoes, onions and other essentials in the Indian diet.

The area known as Punjab is so called because it takes its name from the five rivers that run through the area. Like the area, Punjab is made up of people from different backgrounds and nations who have intermixed to create the present culture. Dancing and singing was said to have been a way of life for the villagers and townsfolk living in Punjab, where the official spoken language is Punjabi.

Since farming was the main form of employment, Bhangra and its music originates from the farmers who would sing whilst tending to their fields, sowing the seeds and cutting crops at harvest time to take to the market. In some ways this is reflected in the movements of Bhangra, which are centred around the many different aspects of tending to the land and growing crops. Most of the work was carried out by men and young boys and thus the dance of Bhangra is very boisterous with an almost macho feel to it, with movements such as foot stamping as well as the music being quite loud and brash, although ladies also enjoy dance from the Punjab, which is known as Giddha.

A festival would be staged after the farmers have tended to their crops and when they returned from the market, the celebrations would begin. In every village the families of farmers would decorate their houses, dress up in their best clothes and treat each other to gifts. Families would send presents and have huge feasts with the parties sometimes lasting for days. During the harvest festival in the villages there is a scene of joyous celebration and colour surrounds you wherever you look. The whole atmosphere of this festival could be likened to Christmas.

In olden times local bands or folk groups would gather together to perform and entertain the villages with tales of the harvest

and stories of how the crops were grown alongside stories of daily life in the villages. Today, in large cities of the Punjab, huge stadiums and sports arenas are used for massive Vaisakhi celebrations. These attract popular singers from the Punjab as well as bands that perform and live abroad.

The tenth and the last Sikh guru, Sri Guru Gobind Singh Jee, used this festival to anoint five people who had pledged to sacrifice themselves for the Sikh brotherhood that was known as the Khalsa.

As Punjabi people have migrated to different parts of the globe, they have taken the harvest festival of Vaisakhi with them as well as the Punjabi folk dance that is known as Bhangra and adapted it to their changed lifestyles. They have held onto a tradition that has been going for many years and is likely to continue, as each year young people have explained to them the significance of the festival that brings meaning to generations who have been born outside India and haven't yet set foot in the Punjab.

Bhangra music is now very popular with first, second and third generations in the U.K who have used western styles of music, instruments and technology to make it more accessible to young people who would rather listen to western influenced music. The Bhangra industry in the U.K is an extremely large industry that, if regulated properly, could rival that of the mainstream record industry with most albums released in the U.K selling to platinum status within weeks of their release.

Ends

## **HISTORY OF THE PUNJAB**

### *Aryan Migrations (1500 BC - 100BC)*

Between 1500BC and 100BC the Aryan people migrated in large numbers to Punjab, drawn mainly by the region's rich agricultural land. The Aryans and their interaction with natives dominated the next thousand-year history of the Punjab and during this time some of the oldest books of human history, the Rig-Vedas, are said to have been written, in addition the Aryan tongue Sanskrit came into use in the area, considered to be the source of the term bhangra.

### *The Persians*

Since the Punjab region was located at the outskirts of the Persian empire, it inevitably came under Persian control. Whilst the Persian king Darius The Great (521 - 486BC) is reported to have attacked the Punjab and occupied some parts, King Gustap finally succeeded in occupying the entire region in 516BC. The Punjab eventually became the wealthiest province in the Persian kingdom.

### *The Greeks & Alexander the Great*

The Greeks, rivals of the Persians, also coveted the fertile land of Punjab. Throughout 500-300BC, several Greek scholars wrote about the area, describing a fertile land with numerous rivers. Then, in 326BC Alexander the Great and his armies seized Punjab. Although Alexander died only nineteen months later, the region remained under the control of Greek rulers for several hundred years. Meanwhile, the Mauryas came to power in India, bringing with them a time of considerable artistic achievements. Some scholars believe that it was during this period that Bhangra emerged.

### *The Muslims*

After the time of the Mauryas, the Punjab - and the rest of India - endured several hundred years of chaos. As the Punjab is located in a strategically valuable position, many different groups fought for its control. Following the birth of Islam in Arabia in the 6th century AD, Arabs rose in prominence and replaced the Persians as the major power in the area. In 712AD, Mohammad bin Qasim commanded an Arab army that conquered much of the Punjab. Three centuries later, several generations of Turk rulers seized the entire Punjab, as well as much of India some time later. The Punjab saw more tumultuous times from the end of the Muslim dynasties until the late 18th Century. Several different Muslim groups, as well as the Mongols, attacked, occupied, and lost various parts of the region numerous times. The area's strategic position was unrivaled and every new ruler sought to seize control of it.

### *The Rise of Sikh Power*

During this chaotic time, a man was born who would transform Punjabi consciousness: Guru Nanak Dev. Born in 1469AD in the district of Sheikhpura, Guru Nanak spent his entire adult life roaming the world. His travels included the whole of Punjab and South East Asia, Mecca, and even Rome. By the time he died in 1539AD he had launched a powerful movement that sought to reject caste, dogma, ritualism, gender inequality, and superstition - the Sikh religion. Over the next two centuries, nine other Gurus led the Sikhs. The tenth and final Guru, Guru Gobind Singh (1661-1708AD) created the Khalsa. This was an army of 'saint-warriors' whose role was to protect the downtrodden, he also gave Sikhs their names: Singh for males and Kaur for women. He charged his Sikhs with the responsibility of fighting for the exploited and the oppressed.

### *Ranjit Singh*

The Sikhs quickly established themselves as the rulers of the greater part of Punjab, culminating with the rule of Maharaja (King) Ranjit Singh, considered by some to be one of the most outstanding rulers in the history of the region. Known for his outstanding abilities in military leadership, diplomacy, and administrative skills, he reunited many small communities at war within themselves and worked towards a united and strong Punjab. He took possession of Lahore in 1799 and was proclaimed Maharaja in 1801. During his reign, Singh signed a treaty to keep the British East India Company from interfering with the Punjab, while he continued to expand his kingdom to the north and west. Although he remained a devout Sikh for his entire life, Singh maintained a secular empire in which citizens of all religions lived together. He died in Lahore on 27 June 1839, and the Sikh Kingdom that he built expired soon after.

### *The British, and the Punjabi Heroes*

In 1849, the British took down the Punjab army who were weakened without the leadership and organisation of Ranjit Singh, and gained control of the region, along with the rest of South East Asia. The British colonial rule was markedly different from that of Ranjit Singh, and the people were extremely unhappy - many Punjabis fought hard against British rule. Although the British committed many atrocities, one event in 1919 is especially significant. At Amritsar, Punjab, about 20,000 demonstrators protesting against British rule confronted troops commanded by General Reginald E. H. Dyer in an open space known as the Jallianwalla Bagh. The troops fired on the crowd, killing an estimated 379 and wounding about 1,200. The shooting was followed by the proclamation of, amongst others, martial law and public floggings. Although the event ended Dyer's career, the governor of Punjab, Michael O'Dwyer, publicly supported his actions. This event left a permanent scar on Indo-British relations and was the prelude to Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation movement. It also brought about the emergence of many revolutionary Punjabis, including Bhagat Singh and

Udham Singh. Many of these Sikhs turned to violence in order to achieve independence, in stark contrast to the methods utilised by Gandhi.

*Bhagat Singh* was born into a family of Sikh farmers in the Punjab in 1907. His father, grandfather, and uncle were all politically active, working to achieve reform and independence in India, and Bhagat would soon develop similar ambitions. He grew up in the uneasy aftermath of the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, visiting the site when he was only fourteen. Although he began his political career by printing and distributing pamphlets and newspapers in an effort to raise political awareness in India, Bhagat Singh soon became one of the many Punjabis who elected to drive the British out of India by violent means. In 1928, he shot a British officer as retribution for the beating to death of an Indian protestor. Bhagat was eventually arrested, and hanged in 1931.

Born in 1899 in the Punjab, *Udham Singh* was an eyewitness to the events at Jallianwalla Bagh. That event was a turning point for Udham, who devoted the rest of his life to liberating India. Between 1919 and 1933 he travelled to America, India, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Germany, and Russia, making many contacts with other revolutionaries. He eventually entered England in 1933, determined to execute O'Dwyer. He remained quiet for seven years, waiting for the perfect public opportunity in order to gain the most publicity for his cause. He finally succeeded in 1940, shooting O'Dwyer at a public meeting in London. He was hanged later that year. Under interrogation in prison, Udham Singh consistently used the name of *Mohammed Singh Azad*, even after the police had discovered his real name. This alias, which incorporates three different religions, symbolised that his sacrifice was for all, regardless of their ethnicity, religion or class.

Both Bhagat Singh and Udham Singh became legendary heroes for Indian people. They were the subjects of countless Bhangra songs, and young people throughout the country idolized them.

### *Partition of the Punjab*

Perhaps because of its ethnic heterogeneity and turbulent history but primarily due to the wealth of the land, the Punjab was partitioned between India and Pakistan when India gained its independence from Britain in 1947. As a result of the Indian Independence act, Punjab was divided into the East Punjab province of the Union of India and the West Punjab province of Pakistan. This division, and the political problems accompanying Indian independence, led to a lack of resources (water, specifically) and a great deal of violence. As a result, many Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs abandoned their homes in the Punjab and moved to other lands.

### *Punjab in the 21st Century*

The years after partition tested traditional Punjabi tenacity. Rapid achievements in agriculture and industry and in the field of education, services, social welfare, and rural regeneration helped the Punjab become one of the most prosperous regions in Southeast Asia. The revival of folk art, song, dance, and drama, the rediscovery of some of the ancient poetry classics as well as Sikh schools of painting have created a sense of pride in the heritage of Punjab.

### *The 50's, 60's & 70's*

Following the difficulties brought about as a result of partition, some eight million people were uprooted, one of the largest mass-migrations in modern history. Due to the possibility of open immigration to Britain from any Commonwealth country, many people came to large British industrial cities like Birmingham, London and Manchester. At the same time, thousands of South Asian people, having moved to work on railways in East Africa during the 1940s and 50s, also came to England – in part due to the actions of the dictator Idi Amin, Gursharan's

own family came to this country because of this. Amin was a sergeant in the British colonial army who after Uganda's independence, rose in the Ugandan armed forces to the position of Commander-in-Chief and in 1971, seized control of the government. Amin was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Ugandans. In 1979, Tanzanian troops invaded Uganda and forced Amin into exile. Amin led out the rest of his life in Saudi Arabia where he died, from natural causes, in 2003.

Thus, South Asian communities formed in Britain from people of diverse backgrounds, each with their own musical traditions. This diversity set the stage for the eclectic nature of the western Bhangra movement in the late 20th Century.

Initially, the early 50's and 60's were a time of readjustment and finding one's way in a very different culture. During this period, particularly in the 50's, many of those who had arrived in the UK saw themselves as temporary residents, however as time went by, people increasingly sought belonging through identification with elements of their cultural heritage. This led, in the late 60's and 70's to singers from the Punjab performing in the UK, as well as growing sales of bhangra and international artists. These singers included modern day legends such as Asa Singh Mastana, Surinder Kaur & Parkash Kaur, Lalchand Yamla Jat, K. Deep & Jagmohan Kaur, and Alam Lohar. Crucially, artists such as Asa Singh Mastana, Surinder Kaur and Kuldip Manak represented Punjabi folk music, and were seen as symbolising the essence of Punjabi culture with regards to its history and people. Bhangra's revival within the Asian Diaspora, noted for its high culture retention, recalls the history of migration, empire and nation that resulted in the splitting of the Punjabi subject with Partition and the subsequent migration.

*The 70's*

The number of bhangra artists began to flourish with an increasing number of artists establishing themselves in the 70's. These included acts such as Bhujangy, Anari Sangeet Party, Saathies and Musafirs as well as such as Kuldip Manak, Amar Singh Chamkila, and A. S. Kang, many of whom are still active today, both in the U.K and abroad. Several influential groups also appeared around this time, including Apna, from Birmingham, and the Bhujungy Group. Apna, most famously known for their hit 'Mera Yaar Vajavey Dhol', are still performing and considered one of the best live acts in Bhangra.

The late 70's also saw the emergence of a flourishing live Punjabi folk music circuit consisting of a range of acts and events such as performances at birthdays and crucially, weddings. A key factor within this was also the geography of the UK, one could travel the length of England within a day, in other countries, where bhangra was struggling to create a network, such as Canada and America, travel required considerably more time, causing problems for travelling musicians who may only have a few days a week available for performances since their role as entertainers co-existed with their, often full time, paid employment. Moreover, England had a tradition of live music, whether this was the traditional English folk music or folk music from the Punjab, for other countries this tradition was never quite so much at the forefront of events.

However, bhangra – whilst in some ways becoming an increasingly sophisticated music form - remained a subculture, heard only within the Asian, predominantly Punjabi, communities of the UK, certainly never part of mainstream media or recreation.

### *The 80's*

For many, the 80's was the time of Wham, Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet and the Thompson Twins, for others, it was a time when Bhangra began to play to increasing audiences and Asian youth slowly came of age in the UK. Bhangra

was critical as a catalyst for Asian youth finding a sense of cultural identity, and crucially, visibility.

Bhangra also began to evolve, as artists looked to a range of musical genre and influences. In 1984, Alaap, a traditional band began work on an album with the producer Deepak Kazanchi, who had previously worked with a range of artists covering a variety of music genre, including mainstream pop and reggae, the resulting album 'Teri Chunni De Sitaré', whilst a bhangra album was a key sound in introducing electronic dance music to traditional bhangra.

Other groups such as Heera also emerged in the 80's. Heera, fronted by Kumar and Dhani, were one of the most popular bands of the 80's. The group established itself with the album 'Diamonds', released early in the 80's. This album was particularly notable for being one of the first Bhangra albums to mix Western drums and synthesizers with traditional Punjabi instruments. Bhangra artists had begun to challenge the boundaries of the genre and look to other music genre such as hip-hop, reggae, house, drum and bass as well as mainstream Western pop.

Moreover, Western pop and mainstream music didn't remain entirely untouched by Asian music throughout the 1980s. In 1982 Sheila Chandra appeared on the BBC chart show Top of the Pops singing "Ever So Lonely" with her band Monsoon, whilst Deepak Kazanchi played guitar next to percussionist Pandit Dinesh in the pop group Blancmange. Then, in 1987, Najma Akhtar released Qareeb – a ghazal and jazz album, with saxophone and santoor working together to capture the musical essence of Urdu love poetry, a record that went on to become a major hit, albeit on the World Music scene.

By the mid 80's bhangra bands could command audiences of approximately 3000 in and around central London and the music of groups such as Alaap and Heera were dubbed the 'Southall Sound'. However, London wasn't the only

urban city at the forefront of Asian music. Birmingham and to a lesser extent the surrounding region rapidly developed a reputation for being at the heart of the Asian music industry and specifically bhangra music. With 90% of Bhangra originating in Birmingham it was fast becoming the centre of the Asian music industry. Reflecting the rich diversity of our multicultural community, Birmingham has nurtured and produced some of the foremost Bhangra artists. One early example of this is that of Harjit Singh, from Wolverhampton, who, early in the 80's began making his name in the world of Bhangra rock as the drummer with well-known Asian pop band Azaad. He now heads Birmingham City Council's World Music Department teaching the Dhol, Tabla, Dholak and Harmonium, passing his musical skills on to school children.

### *The 90's and 00's*

During the last thirty years, Bhangra has enjoyed a surge in popularity worldwide, both in traditional form and as a fusion with genres such as hip-hop, house, and reggae. The 90's and 00's brought about the considerable 'outward' movement of bhangra, with artists finally making some breakthroughs into the mainstream charts. The influence of bhangra was also observed by major record labels, subsequently, Multitone Records, one of the major recording labels associated with Bhangra was bought by BMG. Finally, a recent Pepsi commercial launched in Britain featured South Asian actors and Bhangra music. This, perhaps more than anything, was a true sign of the emergence of Bhangra into popular culture.

The rise of DJ culture saw DJ's following artists and groups in mixing bhangra music with house, reggae, and hip-hop, adding a new flavour to traditional, as well as contemporary, Bhangra. On the dance floor, UK Asian music entered another era as 'Asian underground' embraced club culture – an area further developed in the 'Themes' section.

Leading the way was Bally Sagoo, a Punjabi-Sikh, Anglo-Indian raised in Birmingham. Sagoo was integral to the Bhangra scene not only in raising the profile of bhangra but also in the manner in which he mixed bhangra with other music styles. For Sagoo it was “the combination of tabla, the bass lines, the funky-drummer beat, and the James Brown samples” that were the roots of his music. The first single off his album ‘Dil Cheez’, debuted in October 1996 at No. 12 in the British pop chart, the first Urdu/Hindi song ever to do so. His second single ‘Tum Bin Jaya’, entered at No. 21. Sagoo has hosted his own show on MTV, been signed to Sony, produced original film scores, opened Michael Jackson’s mammoth Bombay concert as well as setting up his own record label ‘Ishq’ (which means love).

Similarly to Sagoo, although from quite a different perspective, was Apache Indian (real name Steven Kapur). Apache combined bhangra with ragga, creating what was called a ‘Bhangra-muffin’ fusion, alternating between Punjabi lyrics and patois, with tabla beats and reggae rhythms, ‘Boom-Shak-a-lak’ reached a previously unheard of number 5 in the British singles charts. Artists such as Apache, whilst not performing traditional Bhangra, were an important factor in Bhangra’s growing mainstream presence. Apache further hit the headlines in 1992 with the release and success of the single ‘Arranged Marriage’ from the album ‘No Reservations’, on Island Records. His second album ‘Make Way for the Indian’ followed in 1995 as did seven hit singles in the top 40. Sadly, his multiple use of musical genre meant that he received criticism from his bhangra, reggae and ragga audiences and commercial success has recently eluded him.

However, bhangra wasn’t only about new fusions, the early 90’s saw many artists returning to the original, folk beats of Bhangra, often incorporating more dhol beats and thumbi. This time period therefore also saw the rise of several young Punjabi singers such as Jazzy Bains – full name Jaswinder Singh Bains - or Jazzy B as he is more commonly referred to. Jazzy B became one of the top

bhangra artists in the world, particularly with sales of his second album, 'Folk and Funky'. Whilst artists such as Daler Mehndi, Surjit Bindrakhia, AS Kang, and Surinder Shinda also hold onto traditional roots, with a strong Punjabi emphasis in their music. A new generation of superstar producers have emerged – with Bally Jagpal and his phenomenally successful group B21, Balwinder Safri's Safri Boys, Harjinder Boparai and Ravi Bal.

### ***Beyond Bhangra***

Asian sounds are a growing feature of both the mainstream and World Music festival and tour scenes. The Asian Equation can be heard at the yearly Tribal Gathering; the reknown Anokha has hit New York and WOMAD; Bally Sagoo supported Michael Jackson in India and Cornershop toured with Oasis. Meanwhile, Talvin Singh won the UK's prestigious Mercury Music Prize in 1999.

Mainstream labels were finally interested in British Asian music too. Talvin Singh records for Island; Warners signed Apache Indian, Amar, Spellbound, Black Star Liner and Deepika all within the year 1997; London Records adopted ADF; and The State of Bengal joined Bjork's One Little Indian label. Top of the Pops appearances were no longer the rarity that they'd been for Sheila Chandra. Jas Mann's 'Babylon Zoo' reached No. 1 in the UK singles chart, followed up by Jyoti Misra's 'Whitetown' and then Cornershop's 'Brimful of Asha' mixed by Norman (Fatboy Slim) Cook. Cook is also working with Sanjay Sen, aka Indian Ropeman at Skint Records.

Today, bhangra sits in a complicated position, traditional bhangra continues to inspire many new artists who draw on its rich heritage and musical components. The continued success and growth of Bhangra music worldwide has provided the impetus for many different musical offshoots from traditional Bhangra. However, 'post bhangra' is too frequently used as a catch all phrase for a hugely diverse

range of Asian/ Western music and performers who have appeared to stem from within bhangra communities.

Perhaps the only true element within the use of the term 'post bhangra' is an acknowledgement of the role played by this musical genre in providing visibility and a collective safe space for emerging British Asian performers. The manner in which the term is used today suggests that the broader public has much to learn about the heterogeneity that exists within British based Asian communities – as well as the music that stems from here. All too often, Asian music is seen as something homogenous – inevitably categorised as bhangra. This ignores the many musical influences that stem into and out of Bhangra, the instruments used, as well as the frequently complex rhythms.

Of particular concern is the manner in which the new 'Asian cool' artists are those who are increasingly seen as distancing themselves from musical forms such as bhangra, or at the very least from traditional notions of bhangra.