



INTERVIEW WITH Gucharan Mall for the Worlds 1st Book on UK Bhangra

Monday 6th November 2006

How did you get into Bhangra? When where and why?

I came at a very early age into England/. I was only 11½. Going back to the late 1963 - And while I was doing my apprenticeship in mechanical engineering and that's the time when a friend of mine said, 'you're doing my head in, how if we get together and form a band?' His name was Kurtar Singh. And, so me and him, we started to get people together, and it was very, very hard because it was only a small community at that time. And we got to or three band members together, but there was nobody to teach us. So we were just struggling listening to old songs. We are going back to 1968 when I started in this game, so going back many, many years.

How did you learn all that? Did you self teach yourselves? What did you pick up? Did you pick up an instrument? How did that happen?

My first instrument was, er, a coffee table, cans and things like that (laugh). Actually the one I bought, which was a Dholak. So I started my career with a Dholak. And like I said we had nobody to teach us, so all we done was picked up listening to records and some of the beats.(talks Punjab) That's the simple way of putting it really. And slowly, slowly some artists started to come to England. We used to go and watch them play and also pick up some ideas, hints and that's how it was.

And when you started off was it Punjabi Folk music or was it a bit of Indian film music? What were you playing around with?

Um, mainly playing around with Punjabi Folk music - I thought that was a little bit easier than Hindi music. Because with Hindi music there is a lot of background music going on. And they don't just have one rhythm section; they'll have like, Congo's and many other instruments. You name it they'll have a bigger, bigger set-up compared to Punjabi tradition music. In olden days there use to be only like maybe 2 or 3 artists on the stage. They'll probably have one or two key player and one harmonium player. The harmonium player would be the singer who would sing either play the harmonium or play the tumbi and sing as well.

So when you started of, where did you perform? Peoples houses, in the clubs... Where were you playing 1960s-1970s?

In the olden days...because in them days the parties were held in small pubs, so they used to book a small room. So only the man used to go to the pub. In one house the ladies used to occupy themselves, whereas the guys used to go to pubs then have a few drinks... Then when we started to perform, they used to book a band. But without the band charging - anything like tips were there income really. So that's the time when you could actually say that the artist, the Bhangra band/ the singing band they was trying to promote music. Now it's very wrong for Bhangra artists to say that we aren't keeping Bhangra alive and Bhangra music. No! To them its work now, because they are charging people £2000- £3000. They can't say it's a hobby they are promoting it - Its work to them. Its people like...teams like myself or Bhangra teams in the UK or around the world. They can say that they are doing...'cause there is so many members in the team and they are still charging £500-£600 for a booking. So by the time you take out the

transport or whatever, the only amount of money they split is between £20-£30 pounds, and that's for a days work. Now these teams, not just my teams, but all teams around the world you can truly say that they are actually the ones promoting the music, the culture and the art the right way.

You talked about the 80s period where Bhangra culture in terms live bands, youth culture was starting to develop. What for you was special about that moment? What was so special about the 80s?

The 80s it was, um, the shows used to happen they used to do daytimers in them days and evening timers. And the audience used to be lovely. The youngsters and the elders (Mummies and Daddies), they used to come. And it was fantastic when Apna sangeet used to perform with bands like Alaap, Heera, DCS (naming other bands in Punjab). I mean the whole system, friendship and the love that all the artists had amongst themselves and also the audience, it was just fantastic to see people getting together. Unfortunately, we can't just blame the audience nowadays, but even if you hear/see the bands at the backstage (talks Punjab) inside there is no love, theirs no affection. Some of the artists probably mind what Im saying, but it's the truth, unfortunately. But the thing is there is room for everybody. There is space for, still, to have love and respect for one another.

In the 80s some people have said that Punjabi music became British Bhangra. For you what was so British about our Bhangra in the 80s? Was it the mixture of say the Dhol, Tumbi and the rock guitar? Or for you is it just simply Punjabi Folk music was just developing?

Like I say the days we started we only had a few members in the band and them bands started to expand, and starting to have more bands. It was nice, like us, Apna sangeet, we kept our tradition. We tried to promote/tour Bhangra. Actually we (Apna sangeet)) were the first one and we were the one who actually brought it to the market in such a big way. And people used to call us the big 'drum boys,' simply because we were the only one in the country who had it all. Not only in this country but in India as well. The only other person who started before me – I call him Ustad Ji - and they was (speaking in Punjab). They were the gentlemen who inspired me. Very, very senior artists. Very, very senior gentleman. Lot of love and respect to him. He was the first artist who actually started playing with a singing band, because in the older stages

For you what is the relationship of the 'Dhol' to Bhangra?

Well I will not call myself Ustad Ji or master, whatever. 'Cause I'm still learning and I've got a long, long way to go. Every time I go on the stage I look at not the good things but what Im doing on the stage, the mistakes Ive made, and then Im kicking myself. But I also tell my kids as well. I say, 'look kids Im sorry that's where Ive made the mistake.' Promoting the art and the culture to the maximum as much as I possibly can. Not just to the Asian community, but also the non Asian community as well. And we are glad that Dhol is going into the mainstream with big bands like...we done a recording with UB40 last year and they took us onto the Live Aid. So there was a lot of other communities including who said 'I am proud of you putting Dhol onto the bigger scale/on the map.

What do you think it is about the 'Dhol' as an image or as an instrument, the sound it makes? Why is the 'Dhol' associated with Bhangra so much?

What it is you see, Dhol being here for centuries is the oldest instrument that you can think off- But, people used to play...they were a lot of senior artists before me they're still lot of senior artists now they are still going to be. But the thing is Dholi's they used to stand on one side and play the Dhol, so a lot of compliment/credit used to go to the dancers. And that's why in the olden days everybody wanted to become a Bhangra dancer and not a Dholi - . And Im the first crazy guy who said now...there's a lot of hard work that goes into the Dhol. Because In the olden days they used to play the Dhol and also sing on top. And it was the same people who used to coach

the team as well. So they had a lot of pressure. So they was coaching the team, but a lot of the compliment would go to the dancers. But they used to forget the guy who was actually playing the Dhol. So that way I said well look I don't want to be the side man I want to be...I want people to look at me. I used to do Martial Arts, boxing and things like that, because fitness was on my side. I don't want to stand still. So I was like come on audience you don't want to watch them (from inside I used to say that), but focus on the people. Don't just watch them look what Im doing, Im playing the Dhol, carrying this heavy instrument which is a bout 10-12 kilos in weight, and Im playing this but also Im dancing. Slowly, slowly people started getting that Dhol feeling inside them. Senior artists if you ask them, 'who inspired you to pick up the Dhol?' The good people will always say Gucharan Mall. Or a lot of guys in my days/times who was competing against me. That's good! Because you need to be having competition or competing with one another to be successful. Because the only way you are going to be successful if you go home and practice hard. For many, many years I never seen my kids grow and been a proper Father. Name wise I was their Father, I was bringing the money in, but I was spending more time with other teams. I was the only team who was coaching so many teams in the history of Bhangra team. Theres a lot of crazy things Ive done. I say crazy because Im a crazy person, Im a happy person. I like to promote things I like to do things. After when Im dead people will remember Gucharan (G. Mall) done this, Gucharan (G. Mall) done this. And then my family, my kids proud of me for what Im doing. And then slowly, slowly the Dhol become so popular all around the world. The only instrument people are talking about is the Dhol. In the days of the Beatles there was only two instruments that came out, but mainly it was the Sitar. Like Ringo Starr/Beatles they bought this Sitar...they made a big impact for many, many years. And now the next thing that came out of (Punjabi word) India is the Dhol, apart from Bollywood dancing.

You talked about making the Dhol a skill on stage. Who influenced you?

Like I said in the olden days there wasn't many bands here. And the only person, like I said, that inspired me on the Dhol, because like I said my main first instrument was Dholak and the other one I seen this gentleman play with And this guy, skinny guy, had a big Dhol, slightly tilting on one side and he had a big moustache. And the guy was playing the Dhol, that's the gentleman I was telling you about,

What would you say is the current state of Bhangra music is now, in you opinion?

OK! You know for like the word to go around the changes need to happen. OK! People are using Drum & Bass, everything, that's good. We want our Punjabi Folk instrument to get involved. The only thing that discourages me is when kids are using, or senior artists...OK, kids you can't blame them simply because they are limited to money. But when big artists they start using sample work, they are putting decent good musicians out of work. That's a little bit naughty. Like I always say, kids go into Drum & Bass, go into this, go into that. But please, please, please know your roots, so what ever you've built on top it'll be much stronger. And you know when you talk to Guri Kari, you say 'yeah Im into this Western stuff, but also I know my roots as well.' A little bit of history and things like that.

Do you still think there is space for the live Bhangra music scene as apposed to just the PA system?

See who do you blame? I think artists actually they are putting themselves well over priced. I mean I seen an artist yesterday – I don't want to mention his name – he's a big artist. When you are charging people £3500-£4000! When you are coming on the stage like a superstar and all the band is wearing normal clothes and you are charging people £3000, they are not stupid. OK, the promoters might be rich/loaded they can afford to pay. But working class people they want to book these bands, they can't. Simply because nowadays the bands are so lucky, the ones who are going, they want to thank their luck star. Simply because the days we started out, like Apna Sangeet, Punjabi Group, any older bands, they used to play non stop for 3-3½ hours without having a break, right. And nowadays bands they've it so easily made, they do an hour in the

beginning, half hour break about 45 minutes. Sometimes if they are lucky they might play for 1 hour half, because then its time to empty the hall. They say, 'Well OK we don't want to start playing till the Bide and Groom comes in and then after when they've done the cake cutting then we'll start.' No! We never use to do that. We thought no, no, no!!!! (Speaks Punjab). We need to start. And sometimes even the parents - never mind the Bride and Groom in the hall – even sometimes the parents was not inside the hall. We used to start... (Speaks Punjab). And because we are working class people this is where we started from. OK God has giving me everything. Has given me a lot of respect - Even when people say 'audience,' I don't call it an audience. To be they are my brothers and sisters, right. I say to them they are the artist. Its people like yourself who put us, simple people like that on the big stage. So a lot of credit goes to all the brothers and sisters, as we like to call them as an audience.

You've been around for nearly 40 years, what would you say – if you could make some predictions – is the future for Bhangra music? Are we going to go down the lines of sampling, recorded mixture, maybe working with White artists, Black artist on a internationally platform. Or do you think Bhangra has a future or it had its 'hey day' in the 80s-90s?

Oh no, no. Bhangra is here to stay. Fads will keep on coming in, different things will come in. Live bands would start, but this is good as well because its tightening the bands up as well. Say well look OK, we've got the DJs to compete against, what do we need to do? They need to book a bigger PA system and do a lot of other things like what the DJs are doing. So and keep the price sensible, so people who do want to book them and...I strongly feel that Bhangra will never die out. Its going stronger and stronger, and live bands would come back. And even the DJs they are happy, they don't criticize about live bands. All they say, well as long as we are booking. Live people say, (Speaks Punjab). No, no, no! What ever is in my kismet, and personally to make to a certain extent, they need to make their own Kismet by working hard. If you work hard then people will book you.

Any specially moment or anecdote in your career as a Bhangra artist that stands out for you, that you think that's special for me or ill take this away with me and remember this for a very, very long time, which is about your involvement in he Bhangra industry?

In my life we've toured around Canada, all around America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia... The biggest moment came when we went into our own country where we was born and performed in India. We performed in Bombay, New Delhi, Chandigarh, Fwargardeh, you know... Fwrgardeh that's the place where we were nearly born, so that was big thing. And then I was awarded by the Central TV as Arts Leadership Midlands of the year award. To me that was very, very big and very, very special. Getting it from local people as arts leadership, that, just the title itself. And then playing for Her Majesty the Queen twice. One was at the Symphony Hall in Birmingham. We played for the Majesty the Queen at the Golden Jubilee in Birmingham, and the second time it was at Pride... (Interviewer interrupts).

What did the Queen say about Bhangra?

Well the Queen, to be honest with you, didn't say much besides 'we played good'. I said, 'Thank you,' and we shook hands. The beauty came when her husband, Duke of Edinburgh, came and he said to me, 'you left handed?' Because there were 10 people, boys and girls, and I was the only odd one out, I was left handed. And when we were performing we thought, oh my, he might not... to them, just say something Punjabi, you know we'll keep on talking...you now what I mean? And then way he came into the room and chatter, that's the time when I thought these two they've been watching us – God thank you. So that was that. In March I was awarded from the House of Commons the Community Punjabi Cultural award. Went outside the House of Commons quite a few times, but never ever thought that one day somebody would be inviting us to give us award.