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Dancing to the Bhangra in New York City

Anjali Gera Roy

Introduction

- 1 Nearly two decades after Rekha Malhotra, alias DJ Rekha, launched Basement Bhangra, a “party that mixes South Asian bhangra music with hip-hop, dancehall and electronic sounds to create an unforgettable New York City dance experience” at SOB’s on Varick Street,¹ it was voted by *Time Out* New York readers as the “best live music venue”. Born in London and raised in Queens and Long Island, Brooklyn based DJ Rekha, who is credited with pioneering bhangra in the US, has been invited to perform at iconic New York events like P.S. 1’s Warm Up Series, Central Park’s Summerstage, Prospect Park’s Celebrate Brooklyn, Brooklyn Museum’s First Saturdays, and the annual flagship Loving Day celebration. She has been recognized by *Newsweek* as one of the most influential South Asians in the US and has received accolades from *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *The Fader*, *The Village Voice*, and *The Washington Post*. The recognition of Basement Bhangra and DJ Rekha by mainstream media, academia and policymakers signals the claims of *desis* or people of South Asian origin to the space of New York City through the performance of a vibrant South Asian youth subculture that originated in the villages of Punjab in North India. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the production of space, this essay focuses on a performance space, namely Basement Bhangra, in New York City to argue that bhangra dancing in the city interrupts its spatial coordinates to resist gendered, racial and class hierarchies. It demonstrates that the social relations of production represented in the architecture, streets and monuments of New York City are subverted through *desis* performing the socialities of the Punjabi *pind* of South Asian cities in the global city’s Village.

Space, Body and Dance

- 2 Following poststructuralist insights into the social production of space, physical space can no longer be decoupled from the social or existential (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996). The understandings of space as socially produced intersect with constructionist theories of the body that have revealed the body, even the gendered body, to be produced by regulatory practices and as implicated in relations of power (Butler, 1999). However, cultural theorists have lately begun to examine the performing body to redirect the sociology of the body from its preoccupation with constructivism to an engagement with embodiment (Turner, 1984). Dance scholars have supplemented these findings by viewing dance as an embodied practice offering a complete sensory experience (Martin, 1998).
- 3 The Euclidean notion of space as given has been displaced, in new understandings of space, by the idea of space as essentially produced. Critiquing the mathematical notion of space absolute and the philosophical definition of space as discursive, Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space* (1991), proposed that “space (social) is a (social) product” (26), both abstract and real, and embodies social relationships. Underlining the need to connect physical with mental and social space, he posited that social space “ceases to be indistinguishable from mental space (as defined by philosophers and mathematicians) on the one hand, and physical space (as defined by practico-sensory activity and the perception of nature) on the other” (27). He explained these relations through a spatial triad consisting of spatial practices, representations of space and representational spaces to demonstrate how such a space was produced. Defining spatial practices as perceived space that each society secretes, he distinguished it from representations of space by which he means perceived space or “the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic dividers and social engineers” (38) and representational spaces or spaces or “space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence, the space of inhabitants and users” (39).
- 4 Lefebvre argued that each society, or rather each mode of production, produces its own space and contains social relations of reproduction and relations of production as well as specific representations of interactions “between social relations of reproduction and production”, which serve to “maintain these social relations in a state of coexistence and cohesion” (32). These relations have become more complex, in his view, under the capitalist mode of production and include three interrelated levels, biological reproduction, the reproduction of labor power and the reproduction of social relations of production. While representations of relations of reproduction are in the form of sexual symbols, representations of relations of production occur in space in the “form of buildings, monuments and works of art” (33). Lefebvre points out that representations of space have a practical aspect in the way they intervene in spatial textures, which are informed by ideology and knowledge, through constructions such as architecture. Arguing that space reflects relations of production and that ideology requires a spatial dimension, he shows how the representation of space in a medieval town is shaped by feudal relations of production and how the representational spaces of the church, the manor and the streets reflect the cosmological dimension. In contrast to the medieval town that reveals an identity between representation of space with ideology and knowledge as well with representational systems, the plan of the urban town follows the capitalist logic of commodities and is dominated by abstract

space as embodied in the café, the monument and the public square that are marked by an implicit consensus.

- 5 Lefebvre drew on the Gramscian notion of hegemony to analyze the actions of the bourgeoisie in relation to space and showed how space serves hegemony in the establishment of a system. He pointed out that in addition to being “a means of production” it is also “a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (26) but added that “the social and political forces which engendered this space seek, but fail, to master it completely” (26). Underlining bourgeoisie’s dominance in the representation of space, Lefebvre notes class struggle as taking place in space and calls attention to the appropriation of the feudal space by masses at different periods in history. Lefebvre’s notion of space can yield incisive insights into the subversion of dominant social and political structures through bhangra’s appropriation of the iconic spaces of New York City to perform *desi* identity.

Desis in the US

- 6 *Desi*, a term derived from *desh* [nation, village], is an Indian American usage that is used to refer to anyone of South Asian origin, including Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Although South Asians display a strong cultural convergence, the term *desi* needs to be deconstructed in view of other differences within South Asian and Indian American cultures that are foregrounded as they merge in the spaces of dance. The usage produces a homogenized narrative of South Asians through differences of class, ethnicity, sect, caste and region leading certain scholars to translate it as Indian-American. Sunita Sunder Mukhi defined being Indian American as “being comfortable, smooth and cool amongst non-Indians”, to be “able to dance Bhangra unabashedly, wear contemporary Indian and western clothes smartly, enjoy the pleasures of an urban, cosmopolitan life in New York, as well as in Bombay, London, or Hong Kong, and still care for mom and dad (at the very least), and go to the temple on occasion...” (49). While the differences between Indian Americans and other South Asians have drawn considerable attention, differences within Indian Americans need to be further investigated, the most conspicuous being that between first and second generation Indian Americans. The tensions between the two are reflected in their derogatory labeling of each other as FOB’s (Fresh off the Boat) and ABCD’S (American Born Confused Desis) respectively. I would prefer to call first generation Indian American or FOB’s (Fresh off the Boat) *desis* and second generation Indian Americans or ABCD’s (American Born Confused Desis) American *desis*.
- 7 Joan M. Jensen, in *Passage from India: Asian Indian Immigrants in North America*, has provided the most comprehensive account of South Asian migration to the US in the first two decades of the 20th century (1988). The earliest South Asian migrants to the US were Punjabis from the Doaba region of Punjab, some of whom arrived directly and others being those brought by the British to work on the Canadian-Pacific railroads. While employers’ preference for the “Hindoos”, as they were erroneously called, over the local workforce on account of their industrious nature, simple habits and lower wages enabled them to find work in the lumber mills, they attracted the deep hostility of local workers in British Columbia and were forced to move south into the U.S. Pacific Northwest and California as farm workers. Several hundred found work as contract laborers in the lumber mills of the city of Bellingham, Washington, home to a 800

member strong Chapter of the Korean Exclusion League. In the infamous Bellingham riots of 1907, 500 white workingmen belonging to this League drove South Asian migrant workers out of the city.



Figure 1. Unidentified Sikh men photographed in Bellingham, circa 1907 (Photo courtesy of the Whatcom Museum of History and Art)

- 8 In addition to the Sikhs, some merchants, intellectuals and students arrived in the US in the first two decades of the 20th century until the Immigration Act of 1924 effectively barred new arrivals from India. After the Second World War, a new act in 1946 permitted only 100 migrants per year from India. It was the removal of national origin quotas in 1965 that set off a new wave of professional migration to the US. As opposed to the early migrants, the post-1965 migrants were urban, middle or upper class, highly qualified, ethnically diverse and easily assimilated into American society due to their exposure to Western culture before arrival. Since the 1970s, there has been an exponential increase in the number of Indian Americans changing the demographic profile of migrants and bringing in greater socio-economic diversity. With the first wave of the migration of highly skilled professionals like doctors and engineers after 1965 and the second wave in the 1980s, the relations of production in neo-capitalism have repositioned “Hindoos” as the model minority of Indian Americans.
- 9 Madhulika Khandelwal’s *Becoming American, Being Indian: An Immigrant Community In New York City* is an excellent introduction to different waves of Indian American migrants to New York City, particularly to the Queens neighbourhood in which DJ Rekha’s family lived for some time. Khandelwal has engaged with the transformation of the predominantly white Queens neighbourhoods, such as Flushing and Elmhurst, through post-1965 Indian American immigration and demonstrated how the movement in and out of Queens foregrounded the class divisions between the successful professionals, who subsequently moved to the suburbs, and working class migrants. The negotiation of Queens’ residents, such as Jackson Heights’ merchants, with the Jackson Heights Beautification Committee that protested against the filth and traffic in the Indian

quarter to rename the 74th Street as Little India is emblematic of South Asian claims to the commercial and residential spaces of New York City.

Bhangra, Global Pop and the Production of Local Space

- 10 Bhangra, a hybrid music produced through mixing Punjabi *dhol* (drums) beats with black rhythms of dancehall, reggae, rap and hip-hop, was invented in the middle of the 1980s by second generation British Asian youth and appropriated in the mobilization and performance of South Asian diasporic subjectivities (Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma, 1996; Huq, 1996; Dudrah, 2002a; Dudrah, 2002b; Gera Roy, 2010). Since South Asian youth, particularly young women, were forbidden from attending late night events, these hybrid forms of bhangra that were performed at “dayjams” or afternoon rave parties in basements and abandoned buildings became the center of a vibrant and dynamic South Asian youth culture in Britain. Over the following decade, bhangra dancing in UK clubs, including Bhangra Nights pioneered by the enterprising DJ Ritu, became a regular feature in London, Manchester, Birmingham and other cities and towns in UK. Bhangra became part of British popular culture and was disseminated across the globe, including to the US.
- 11 Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, in their Introduction to *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual* (2004), explained the term “music scene” used first by journalists and subsequently by academics “to designate the contexts in which a cluster of producers, musicians and fans collectively share their common musical tastes to collectively distinguish themselves from others” (1). Bennett and Peterson defined three kinds of scenes, the local, which is “clustered around a specific geographical focus” (6), the translocal or “widely scattered local scenes drawn into regular communication around a distinctive form of music and lifestyle” (6) and virtual, in which “people scattered around great physical spaces create the sense of a scene” (7). While discussing local scenes, they pointed out that more recent work on local scenes is “concerned with how emergent scenes use music appropriated by global flows and networks to construct particular narratives of the local” (7). For instance, Gregory Diethrich, in “Desi Music Vibes: The Performance of Indian Youth Culture in Chicago”, warned against equating all diasporic music scenes and argued that Indo-American youth in Chicago hybridized *desi* (bhangra and Hindi remixes) sounds with an essentially Chicago sound, namely House, to produce a specifically Indo-Chicagoan identity (2000, 36). Bennett and Peterson’s “scene perspective” and their assertion that music and cultural signs appropriated from other places can be “recombined and developed in ways that come to represent the local scene” (8) may be used to understand New York Bhangra scene’s appropriation of Bhangra’s global flows to construct a distinctively New York experience.
- 12 Following Martin Stokes, *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Space* (1994), several studies have engaged with the construction of place through music and dancing (Baily, 1994; Stokes, 1994; Gera Roy, 2009). In an early essay, Gayatri Gopinath had proposed that bhangra be regarded as “a diasporic cultural formation” and argued that, as a diasporic construct, it “reveals the processes by which multiple diasporas intersect both with one another and with the national spaces that they are continually negotiating and challenging” (297). However, Gopinath’s caveat that bhangra should be

viewed as creating and working “within a *spatial economy*”, and “to be read as inhabiting multiple positions both *within* a particular context and across local contexts and the diasporic web of identity” needs to be kept in mind while analyzing the Indian American scene (297). Sunaina Maira has played a significant role in foregrounding the importance of dancing to bhangra in the production of diasporic youth identity, which she revealed to be inscribed by race, gender, class, ethnicity and region. In, in her path-breaking book *Desis in the House*, Maira noted the emergence of “a new popular culture, based on dance parties and music mixes, that is as much a part of New York—and also global—club culture as it is of a transnational South Asian public culture” (2). She announced that “the massive beats of a new sound reverberated in New York City nightlife in the mid-1990s a mix of Hindi film music and bhangra, a North Indian and Pakistani dance and music with American rap, techno, jungle and reggae” and “the Indian party scene” became a major component of Indian American youth culture in New York city (2002, 12). While arguing that “the second-generation Indian American youth subculture that introduced this remix music has become a part of the city’s broader popular culture, heralded to the mainstream by concerts at the Summerstage Series in Central Park, articles in the local news media, and documentaries by local independent filmmakers” (1999, 290), Maira pointed out that “Indian American youth culture is a site where the vibes of ‘cool’ are mixed with the strains of collective nostalgia, and where second-generation youth perform a deep ambivalence towards ethnicity and nationality” (2002 16). Sounding a note of warning about the remix culture heralded by Maira, Zumkhawala-Cook has examined hip-hop’s fascination with bhangra and ‘film-I’ song to argue that Jay Z’s cannibalization of Punjabi MC’s “Mundian” in the post-9/11 era reproduces the racist politics underpinning the United States’ global hegemony” (44). Moorthy and Gopal believe that “the cultural work of such appropriations is not only troubling but also vastly different from the ‘progressive’ affiliations and identificatory practices Bollywood sound has enabled in the United Kingdom and among activist groups in the United States” (44).

Dancing to the Bhangra in the US

- 13 Unlike UK that has emerged as a major center of bhangra production with UK bhangra producers frequently shuttling between UK and Punjab, the bhangra scene in the US emerged a decade later through a bhangra remix culture led by DJs who preferred to mix it with rap and hip-hop rather than reggae.
- 14 Maira reported that Bhangra was being performed at private weekend parties organized largely by *desi* students in US colleges and universities, and later by organizers, in clubs and restaurants in the 1990s until “the first regular bhangra night at a mainstream club in New York” was “hosted by the ubiquitous DJ Rekha”ⁱⁱ in “S.O.B.’s, a world music club and the venue of Bhangra Basement” (Maira 1999) in 1994. Since the decade and a half of its launch and Maira’s findings, Basement Bhangra has witnessed the biggest names in UK bhangra, including Panjabi MC, Apache Indian, Hard Kaur, and Scottish production duo Tigerstyle, perform live and has been voted by *Time Out* New York readers as the “best live music venue.” Even though it moved to Le Poisson Rouge in 2009, its 16th birthday made it to the “Must See” *Time Out* list in 2013. Rekha acquired an iconic status as an ambassador of bhangra with the launch of her album being reported in the *New York Times*:

For a decade she has been host of the monthly Basement Bhangra parties at S.O.B.'s, which were among the first to introduce New York audiences to bhangra, the Punjabi club music that wound up on hits by Jay-Z and Missy Elliot and on cult favorites by M.I.A. She has been curator of South Asian-related events for Summer Stage, Celebrate Brooklyn and the Brooklyn Museum, lectured on South Asian-American pop culture at New York University—yes, she was on her own curriculum—and arranged the music for “Bridge & Tunnel,” Sarah Jones’s Tony-winning solo show. And most recently Ms. Malhotra released the first “Basement Bhangra” album (Koch Records), a 17-track compilation of mixes with a roster of international music stars like Panjabi MC and Wyclef Jean (Ryzik, 2007).

- 15 Rajinder Singh Rai, the British performer who, as Panjabi MC, put bhangra on the US map with Jay Z rapping on his “Mundian to bach ke” (or “Beware of the Boys”), and who was one of the first artists to have performed live at Basement Bhangra, commended her for wholeheartedly believing in “the bhangra movement” and “representing bhangra in the capital of the world, which is New York” (quoted in Ryzik, 2007).
- 16 Over the last seven years, DJ Rekha has been invited to deejay at the most prestigious community and state events in the US, including a party for the newly elected President Obama at the White House, at the end of which the US President declared the mix of bhangra with hip-hop as a uniquely American sound, and at the first state sponsored Diwali party in 2013. DJ Rekha is careful to describe Basement Bhangra as a truly New York experience and bhangra as a purely New York sound that is inflected with the alternative narrative of hip hop that is shared by Indian American youth. It would be educating to examine this urban New York Indian American space and its negotiation of the Punjabi *pind* or village with the Village in the global city of New York.
- 17 The creation of a space for bhangra, the Punjabi harvest dance, nearly a century after Punjabi migration to the United States, foregrounds the exclusionary spaces of the nation marked by expulsions of certain kinds of migrants from certain spaces of the nation. Maira’s brief introduction to this history while tracing the origins of racist slurs faced by her *desi* respondents growing up in ethnic enclaves such as Queens in the 1970s can lead to a more sustained engagement with the spatialities attached to bhangra. The recent inclusion of ethnic migrants in the spaces of consumption gestures to the relations of production at the turn of the 19th century when cheap South Asian labour on railroads, timbermills and farmlands was appropriated in the space of production but denied entry into spaces of consumption.

The Village in New York City

- 18 Catalina Neculai in *Urban Space and Late 20th-Century New York Literature: Reformed Geographies* notes that “a peculiar feature that has characterized the development of New York culture since the beginning of the 20th century is an intensifying relationship between urban cultural economies and the workings of urbanized and urbanizing capital” (51). Describing New York culture as “progressive, politically active, resistant, and market-repellant”, she points out that “it did not succumb to the lures and snares of an exclusionary regime of speculation and redevelopment but sought, instead, collateral avenues, alternative grammars, and clandestine spaces from where it could weaken the hegemonic rule of capital and challenge spatial and cultural

commodification” (53). Neculai mentions the urban “edge” such as the bohemia of Greenwich Village at the beginning of the 20th century or the bohemia of East Village in the latter half that hosted spaces that resisted incorporation (53). The Village has been the site for the resistance to the urban renewal of New York City proposed by urban planner Charles Moses predicated on a system of parks and expressways—epitomized by the proposed Washington Park expressway—which would guarantee order, led by Jane Jacobs, an opposition that could be viewed as one between logic and nonsense. In contrast to the hostility of modernist planning to mixed-use urban space and to streets, a narrow space used for many purposes, that made the city a place of chaos was the struggle of its residents to save the architecture and paved public space of the Village, which was really a “nostalgia for disorganization, irrationality, and excess matter in the face of the plans for an ordered and sensible new city” (Shannon, 2004, 143). As Greenwich Village was once a hamlet that was permitted to retain the 18th century street pattern in the West Village, its streets, named rather than numbered, narrow, and some curved at odd angles, reveal a more organic layout than the planned pattern of the 19th century grid plan.

- 19 The Village as a radical, progressive, countercultural bohemia, constructed by a succession of artists, avant garde art and alternative music, has been the site for protest movements that have opposed discursive/epistemic and spatial hegemonic structures. It opens a room for North Indian bhangra in New York City that is, as Rekha reiterates, an alternative space. While Maira (2002) and Zumkahwalla-Cook (2008) have incisively engaged with Basement Bhangra and the nightclub S.O.B.’s, S.O.B.’s strategic location in Greenwich Village, an important landmark in American bohemian culture, requires a more nuanced analysis.ⁱⁱⁱ The origins of the Village in a Native American hamlet cultivated by African settlers freed by the Dutch and its development as a hamlet under the British separate from the larger New York City to the South has deep resonances with the deterritorialized *pind* [village] invoked in bhangra music as well as with hip-hop’s Caribbean plantation. However, the architecture of the warehouses, the manufacturing lofts and warehouses recalls the struggle between white and Asian races and the relations of production in which South Asian workers competed with white in the reproduction of labour power following the capitalist logic of commodities. The urban plan of the 19th century town was inscribed by racist imperial ideologies in which South Asians were perceived as “low-caste Hindus, a dark mystic race” living in “tumble-down shacks” (Shah, 1999, 255).

Sound of Brazil, Hip-hop and Basement Bhangra

- 20 Basement Bhangra nights were held for more than a decade at S.O.B.’s, a club located on Varick Street in SoHo in South Village. SoHo refers to the area being “SOuth of HOuston (Street)”, a term that was coined by urban planner Chester Rapkin. It is a neighborhood in Lower Manhattan, whose claim to fame rested earlier on the location of artists’ lofts and art galleries but is now noted for upscale boutiques and international chain outlets. The land that is now SoHo is part of a grant of farmland given to freed slaves of the Dutch West Indies Company during the colonial period. SoHo developed into a lively shopping and entertainment district in the middle of the 19th century but saw the exodus of its middle class residents and the arrival of small and large manufacturing concerns by the 1880s making it the mercantile and dry goods

trade center of the city. After the end of the Second World War and the movement of the textile industry elsewhere, some buildings were replaced by warehouses and printing plants and others were torn down. The revival of SoHo began when artists, attracted by low rents, large work area and natural light, moved into empty manufacturing lofts in the 1950s onwards. The multiple reinscriptions of the relations of production in this space through artists' occupation of the manufacturing spaces of the fabric and timber industry at the end of the 19th century and of abandoned warehouses between the 1950s and 1970s are reiterated in South Asian migrant groups' appropriation of the bohemian space.

- 21 S.O.B.'s, an abbreviation for Sounds of Brazil, a live music venue and restaurant in SoHo opened by Larry Gold in 1982 to showcase the rich African-Latino heritage, was located on a barren stretch at the corner of Varick and Houston Streets in its early days that transformed into the trendy neighborhood of SoHo. The Wikipedia entry on S.O.B.'s describes it as "a club that attracts local and international crowds that continues to specialize in Latin music, Haitian, Brazilian, Caribbean, R&B, Hip-Hop and World music." *Time Out* clarifies that "the titular sounds of Brazil (S.O.B.—get it?) are just some of the many global genres that keep this spot hopping. Hip-hop, soul, reggae and Latin beats all figure in the mix, with Seu Jorge, Zap Mama and Wyclef Jean each appearing of late" (February 22, 2010). Peter Landau, in *New York Nightlife*, agrees that "a genuinely mixed crowd of revelers flocks to S.O.B.'s for polyrhythmic, south-of-the-equator beats: Cuban salsa, Jamaican reggae, Brazilian samba, African pop" but includes, in these global genres, "even Indian Bhangra (laced with break beats) at DJ Rekha's red-hot Basement Bhangra party." It would appear that bhangra has to be subsumed under recognizable categories of hip-hop or world music to win a place on New York City's soundscape. A visit to Basement Bhangra in May 2008 and reports of other events from a publicity team, while confirming Maira's findings about bhangra's becoming a part of city's broader popular culture, demonstrated that *desi* music is still located within a neo-orientalist frame that governs the consumption of bhangra in contemporary U.S. popular culture. Yet the performance of *desi* music in one of the iconic spaces of New York city inscribed with a progressive, political and artistic resistance challenges hegemonic socio-economic and spatial structures.
- 22 During my conversation with her, Rekha listed a couplet from the Birmingham based folksinger Malkit Singh as one of her favourites.
- Aj gorean de disco nahin jana
Aj bhangra pan noon ji karda ae
(Today I don't wish to visit white clubs
I feel like dancing the bhangra today)
- 23 Accustomed to the widely held perception of bhangra in India as light, fun-filled music and of Malkit Singh as a popular entertainer, the affect produced by popular musical genres such as bhangra or Bollywood on second generation American *desis* appeared disproportionate to anyone unfamiliar with the historical background of the experience of exclusion and racism faced by *desis* despite their acquisition of a model minority status through the migration of highly skilled Indians and their over-achieving children.
- 24 Revelers walking down Varick Street and the sea of turbans visible in the serpentine queue outside S.O.B.s reproduced the *yaari* or friendship gangs that meander through the narrow lanes of the Punjabi *pind* or streams of people milling in urban Indian

bazaars. Shouting greetings at one another, exchanging jokes as they crossed the street or waited in the queue, these youths reproduced the social relations of Punjabi villages and of Indian cities disrupting the grid pattern of New York's urban planners.



Figure 2. S.O.B.'s in Varick Street, New York City

- 25 The small dance floor on S.O.B.'s was near empty at 7.00 p.m. despite organizers' incentive of a free drink and early door-price except for a group of dancers crowding around a bhangra instructor who were possibly availing the free bhangra lessons between 7.30.-9.30 p.m. mentioned on the website.^{iv} The club's rustic Punjabi ambience was largely produced on this night through traditional bhangra music videos playing on the giant wall screens with Punjabi pop singer Gurdas Mann leading Punjabis on a nostalgic visit home to the Punjabi village where folk bhangra dancer Pammi Bai could be seen calling out to Jat Punjabis or Punjabi cultivators to be proud of being Punjabi, essaying his signature "malwai giddha" moves, and Punjabi youth icon Jazzy B begging his beloved to tidy her snake like tresses with his signature British Asian Bhangra steps. By the time DJ Eddie Stats arrived and took his position at the turn table to play reggae, techno and rap beats,^v silhouettes of young men and women clad in slinky clubwear, raising their arms and bending their legs, cast long shadows on the brightly dressed figures on the screen. The club's reputation of drawing a racially mixed crowd was upheld by the presence of African American and white clubgoers.^{vi} Brown bodies of both *desis* and American *desis*, flaunting ethnic markers such as turbans, *chunnis* [a long rectangular scarf], bangles and *bindis* [dot worn by Hindu women on the forehead] over trendy urban clothing still dominated the dance floor.



Figure 3. Black, White and Brown on the Dance Floor

- 26 As more *desis* trickled in, Stats decided to alternate hip-hop beats with bhangra and Bollywood and had almost everyone flailing their arms and shrugging their shoulders in perfect imitations of bhangra dancing in the music videos playing on the walls “forming one pulsating body of ‘amorphous’ South Asians” as “a kinesthetic enlivening of hybridity” (Mukhi, 2000, 147). Rekha’s arrival was heralded by the “*ik panjaban* [A Punjabi lass]” bhangra number from the Bollywood film *Major Saab* (1995) executed by the superstar of Hindi cinema Amitabh Bachchan.



Figure 4. DJ Eddie Stats & DJ Rekha at the turntable

- 27 Drowned in a sea of brown, white and black bodies who had worked themselves into a fine frenzy by now, I inched my way to the dance floor to greet Rekha and found a youthful reveler, high on bhangra and more, tugging at my silken scarf and inquiring whether it was a different kind of chunni. “Dancing the bhangra with others who are experiencing this self-same aliveness” caused “the barriers of individuation to dissolve”, as Mukhi had asserted (2000, 147). In her interview with the *New York Times*, Rekha had been categorical about making her parties accessible:

I get a lot of comments, especially from the more suited clientele, like: “Why don’t you take this to a nicer place? You could charge more,” Ms. Malhotra said. “I’m like: Are you kidding me? Do you miss what I’m about? The minute you charge more, you just filter people out” (2007).

- 28 Although the inclusiveness mentioned by Rekha was reflected in the mix of club-goers waiting outside S.O.B.s, the suited clientele^{vii} appeared to maintain a careful distance from fresh off the boat *desis* sporting golden chains and earstuds. However, my conversations with some of the club-goers waiting outside S.O.B.’s confirmed the presence of first generation youth in the club complicating the widely held understanding of bhangra as a second generation diasporic music. These gendered, class and locational differences became pronounced as I conversed with three of the groups later: preppie Punjabi students from the Rutgers University and other university Bhangra teams, magnificent in their turbans, clean-shaven, kada-sporting Sikhs straight off the boat from the Majha and Doaba regions of Punjab and a few white American young women mesmerized by Indian culture to suggest different meanings that bhangra dancing might have for different groups of Asians and non-South Asians.^{viii} The elevation of the status of disavowed national musics such as bhangra or Bollywood to ethnocultural identity signifiers and their cultural capital in the identity

narratives of American *desis* appeared to be grossly exaggerated to *desis* who largely frequent bhangra or Bollywood parties as familiar leisure activities.^{ix}



Figure 5. Day of the Turban: Yaari Gangs Queuing Up Outside SOB's

- 29 Even though they appeared to be sharply dressed, I would not have been able to differentiate the three young men, two *mona* or clean-shaven and one turbaned Sikh, with *desi* Sikh youth sporting *kadas* on their wrists until they revealed their American *desi* location through their accent.

Interviewer: You came here as a child?

Turbaned American *desi*: I was two.

Interviewer: How old are you?

Turbaned American *desi*: I am 23.

- 30 The three young men from New Jersey confirmed the experience of other South Asian youth growing up in the US, of having gone to all white schools and disidentifying with their Indianness to assimilate, and of acquiring a sense of pride after coming into contact with other American *desis* and *desi* youth on entering University that culminated in their forming of the New Jersey Bhangra Team.

Interviewer: Did you always dance the bhangra?

Turbaned American *desi*: Family parties, it was always there. But actually at the college I started competing. Me and couple of my friends started the Rutgers team. We started the bhangra team.

Clean-shaven American *desi*: He is the master. I sing for the team.

Interviewer: Do you sing modern songs or traditional *bolian* [calls and responses]?

Clean-shaven American *desi*: I sing *bolian*.

Interviewer: Where do you pick up the *bolian*?

Turbaned American *desi*: We actually research like. We go to seminars. Things like that. There is a guy out here in New York, what's his name? Joginder Singh. He does seminars. He told us the entire history, everything, how *jhummar* actually originated. He knows everything. We owe a lot to him.

Clean-shaven American *desi*: So we basically learnt. It would be nice to learn if you know the history of it. We came across a lot of different *bols* [lyrics]- like traditional *bolian*. So we incorporated a lot of that. Plus we also incorporated famous songs people know.

- 31 These three key members of the team that had participated in international bhangra competitions held in the US and Canada would always look for opportunities such as those offered by Basement Bhangra to demonstrate their skills.

Interviewer: So it is very big in the colleges?

Clean-shaven American *desi*: Yeah very big, in some of the colleges. Every school has a team, pretty much every university.

Interviewer: With Punjabis or non-Punjabis?

Clean-shaven American *desi*: A lot of the universities. A lot of the teams are very multicultural. There are American people out there. There are Latin American people out there.

Interviewer: How long have you been doing it?

Clean-shaven American *desi*: The first official competition was in 1994! So it's been like 15 years!

Interviewer: You still perform here?

Turbaned American *desi*: We don't do it so much any more.

Someone in the crowd: UCLA, UCLA(shouting).

- 32 As I heard voices cheering other teams, it appeared that the event had attracted teams from other parts of the US who had congregated in this bhangra space to reaffirm their collective ties even as they competed with one another. While these American *desis* articulated their resistance to official representations of classical forms as national culture through their enthusiastic appropriation and display of bhangra as roots, their selective appropriation of certain ethnic cultural forms and identity markers to produce a specific Indian American space appeared to have been underpinned by both anxieties and appropriation.

- 33 Basement Bhangra's resistance to exclusions of all forms—race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class and caste—was corroborated by the presence of three more clean-shaven Sikhs, wearing baseball caps but speaking the Doaba dialect of Punjabi that clearly identified them as *pendus* or rustics. Having arrived directly from Nawanshahr, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Phagwara, small towns that have been the fulcrum of several waves of Punjabi migration, they represented the 1980s migration of less affluent South Asians to neighborhoods such as Queens largely through family networks.

Interviewer: aethe kidan aye [How did you get here]?

Desi: ghumman aai si, kam karan lag gaye [I came as a tourist but started working].

Interviewer: kidan lagda hai [Do you like it here]?

Desi: theek ae [It is all right].

Interviewer: ghar di yaad naheen o aand i [Don't you miss home?]

Desi: ghar di yaad aandi ae. Aena de naal kami poori kar lehne aan - yaaran dostan de naal. ghar di yaad te aandi ae, par aieder hi rehna ae - kam te karna paina ae. Rehna te aethe hi hai, jadon mood baniya chale jawange. Family aethe hi hai- add i-baki pind wich ae [I do miss home. I fill up that void through them, with my friends and mates. I miss home. But I have to live here, have to earn a living. I have to live here. But if I feel like I would make a visit home. My family—almost half—is here. The rest is in the village].

- 34 Having been raised with bhangra, they found the idea of learning it formally ludicrous but were surprisingly tolerant of the attempts of *goras*, or whites, to “move this side or that side”, as they put it, or of their American *desis*' carefully learned steps.

Interviewer: aethe je bhangra honda othe je honda hai different honda ae [Are the bhangra here and the bhangra there different]?

Desi: aethe different ae India ich different ae [Here it is different, in India it is different].

Interviewer: aenan noon samajh aanda ae jede angrez ne [Do they understand it, the white people]?

Desi: samjh te aonda nahin. Music ute dance te oh te kar laende ne. Real bhangra oh te hai hi nahin- ya Punjabi bhangra pa rahen, oh te pasa time pass kar rahe ne loki [They can dance to the music all right. Real bhangra—that is not there—or like Punjabis dance the bhangra, people just turn around and pass time].

- 35 As three young men out on a night of fun, these lads reproduced the *yaari* or friendship gangs of Punjabi villages and towns on Varick Street.



Figure 6. Girls Day Out: Desi Girl with Gori and Yaari Gangs

- 36 It was in the *gori* or young white woman from New York, who was introduced to Basement Bhangra by her Indian American friend, that the orientalist frame was most visible. The young woman appeared to be intoxicated by all things Indian, from Bollywood movies to “cute Indian men” that she hoped she would marry one day. On a more serious note, her confession that she found a retreat from the unfriendly vibes of New York City in Basement Bhangra where everyone was so friendly confirmed the inclusivity that Rekha aspires towards in the nights she organizes.

Interviewer: How did you get interested in bhangra?

Gori: Our roommate.

Interviewer: Is she from India?

Gori: No, she is Indian American. But she travels to India.

Interviewer: Did she hear about it in India?

Gori: Maybe she heard about it here. Ever since we came here last month...

Interviewer: Have you been coming here regularly?

Gori: Just once...the energy...

Gori: I really like it because the vibe in New York is not always friendly. But the vibe I got here was really celebration of life—friendly and open. People dance differently—pushing up on you- you know—we give each other more space.

Gori: I am from here. But I am obsessed with everything from India. I want to go to India. And marry a cute Indian man!

Gori: The Indian man knew all the words. I don't have one culture where I know all my songs. A culture where the whole community knows all the songs.



Figure 7. Gori de nakhre shone lagde ne

Conclusion

- 37 Lefebvre's notion of the production of space, the dialectical relationship between space and hegemony and space as reflective of relations of production is illustrated by the performance of *desi* space through bhangra dancing in one of the iconic spaces of New York City. *Desis'* claim to this space of consumption challenges those social relations of production that appropriated South Asian labour in the spaces of production while excluding it from the spaces of consumption. The elevation of the "poor class physically as well as mentally," Hindoos with brains that do "not readily grasp even the elementary problems of this country" (Shah, 1999, 255), into the intellectual and professional elites was signaled by the children of post-1965 model minority migrants. While their high technical and professional qualifications had enabled *desi* migrants to disrupt white hegemonic ideologies in the space of production, they had remained excluded from those of consumption despite their elevation to a model minority status.^x Dancing to the bhangra in the heart of New York City signifies South Asians' symbolic claims to the space of New York City and to that of the nation. Through performing the sounds of the Punjabi *pind* or village in the Village in the city, they

disrupt hegemonic urban spaces that were used as instruments of domination of exclusion and control.



Figure 8. Desis Change New York City's Skyline

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ABSTRACTS

Nearly two decades after Rekha Malhotra alias DJ Rekha launched Basement Bhangra, a "party that mixes South Asian bhangra music with hip-hop, dancehall and electronic sounds to create an unforgettable New York City dance experience" at SOB's on Varick Street, which subsequently moved to Le Poisson Rouge, it has been voted by *Time Out New York* readers as the "best live music venue". Born in London and raised in Queens and Long Island, Brooklyn based DJ Rekha, who is credited with pioneering bhangra, had been invited to perform at events like P.S. 1's Warm Up Series, Central Park's Summerstage, Prospect Park's Celebrate Brooklyn, Brooklyn

Museum's First Saturdays, and the annual flagship Loving Day celebration held in New York City, recognized by *Newsweek* as one of the most influential South Asians in the US and received accolades from *The New York Times*, CNN, *The Fader*, *The Village Voice*, and *The Washington Post*. With Rekha being invited to deejay at major public events in NYC, bhangra could claim to be officially inducted in the global city's soundscape. The recognition of Basement Bhangra and DJ Rekha by mainstream media, academia and policymakers signals the claims of *desis* to the space of New York city through the performance of a vibrant South Asian youth subculture that originated in the villages of Punjab in North India. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's notion of the production of space, this essay focuses on a performance space to argue that the dancing in the city interrupts its spatial coordinates.

Près de vingt ans après leur lancement par Rekha Malhotra, alias DJ Rekha, les soirées Basement Bhangra, « mélange de musique bhangra d'Asie du Sud, de hip-hop, de dancehall et de sons électroniques, créant une expérience de dance unique à New York », lancées au départ au SOB, sur Varick Street, avant de déménager au Poisson Rouge, viennent d'être choisies par les lecteurs de *Time Out* « meilleures soirées de music live ». Née à Londres, élevée dans Queens et sur Long Island et aujourd'hui installée à Brooklyn, DJ Rekha, promoteur du bhangra aux États-Unis, a été invitée à se produire aux Warm Up Series du P.S. 1, à la Summerstage de Central Park, au Celebrate Brooklyn dans le Prospect Park, aux First Saturdays du Brooklyn Museum et lors des célébrations du Loving Day à New York ; elle a été élue par *Newsweek* « personnalité d'Asie du Sud la plus influente aux États-Unis » et a eu les honneurs du *New York Times*, de CNN, du *Fader*, du *Village Voice* et du *Washington Post*. Avec l'accueil réservé à Rekha dans les plus grands événements musicaux newyorkais, il est dorénavant possible d'affirmer que la musique bhangra fait officiellement partie du paysage musical de la ville. La reconnaissance des soirées Basement Bhangra et de DJ Rekha par la presse généraliste, les universitaires et les décideurs politiques est un indicateur de la volonté des *desis* de s'appropriier l'espace urbain grâce aux performances d'une *subculture* jeune dont les origines se trouvent dans les villages du Pendjab du nord de l'Inde. En nous appuyant sur la notion de production d'espace mise en avant par Henri Lefebvre, nous nous pencherons au cours de cet article sur un espace de *performance*, les soirées Basement Bhangra, pour affirmer que la dance provoque une rupture dans la structuration spatiale de la ville.

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Mots-clés: Bhangra, *desi*, Basement Bhangra, DJ Rekha, The Village

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