

## **“Balle-Balle, Balle-Balle”: Fashion – British bhangra style<sup>1</sup>**

**Rajinder Dudrah\***

School of Media, Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK

This article explores the fashion and style politics that can be found in the development of British bhangra music: a post-war song and dance genre that fuses elements of Punjabi lyrics and traditional South Asian instruments with global music including pop, disco, RNB, reggae, dance, grime and Bollywood. Existing research on this genre has primarily been presented in terms of musical and lyrical analysis as well as the politics of identity formation for its British Asian artists and audiences. Contributing to this work but also developing a hitherto unexplored area, the fashion and style politics of dress in British bhangra is analysed to consider socio-cultural possibilities for exploring British Asian bodies. The article uses a cross-disciplinary approach from Media and Cultural Studies and Fashion Studies to read fashion in British bhangra music videos, album cover sleeve artwork and in the memorabilia and visual archives from the Soho Road to the Punjab Exhibition.

**Keywords:** British Asian; British bhangra; cultural identities; fashion; fashion and the body; style politics

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\* Email: Rajinder.Dudrah@bcu.ac.uk

## Introduction

A translation of the verse lyrics to the popular 2010 track “*Morni/Peahen*” by the Coventry based British bhangra artist Panjabi MC can be made as: “Where are you off today again then, dressed like a peahen?” What does this mean, or how best might we interpret this urban slang from the Punjabi language? Is the reference to a peahen only reserved for females? Or rather, is it a more generic call to both genders, who might strut her/his stuff in everyday life, as well as on the dance floor where dress, style and cultural identities often coalesce?<sup>2</sup> What about the song’s accompanying music video: what possibilities can be analysed and read by exploring gender, clothes and fashion?<sup>3</sup>

The video, which is 2 minutes and 53 seconds long, depicts a beautiful young woman as the leading protagonist, who is preparing to meet the DJ artist, Panjabi MC, and their friends who are hip hop-bhangra street dancers. It features fashionable and aspirational South Asian youth who appear to be in their late teens to twenties. The video begins with close-up shots of the central female character which fragment parts of her upper body, including her face, hands and arms. She is dressing up, getting ready to go out, to be seen and to see others. She heavily accessorises herself with bangles, wrist chains and necklaces, and runs her hands through her well-groomed hair in front of the mirror. She smiles enjoying this moment of dressing and turns up the music loud on her HiFi music system (the track playing on her CD is the track “*Morni*”). In later scenes, she is shopping or browsing in a bazaar on her way to meet her friends. The scenes are layered with the sound of the song with the folk lyrics sung by the male artist Lovely Nirman (consisting of the catchy use of the “*morni*” chorus refrain: “Where are you off today again then, dressed like a peahen?”). These are laced with percussive Indian music, the dhol, hip-hop break beats and dancing that suggest artistry in motion, creativity and the coming together of different musical cultures.

The young woman figuratively acts as the *morni* that the song refers to. The setting of the *diegesis* (the depicted world on screen) is an urban Indian cityscape. In the first part of the video, up to 37 seconds, she is enjoying preparing to go out, and the spectator through the medium shots and the framing of the camera is in the position of a voyeur who is looking in. As she leaves her apartment and walks to the central shopping areas, she is being watched by and is there for the gaze of men, although she does not reciprocate. This woman is dressed fashionably in a body-fitting and above knee-length outfit as she walks alone in an Indian city space. Her fashionably-clothed body parades confidently, like the *morni*/peahen. She is accessorised with chains, bangles and make-up of choice, and her urban outfit and haircut initially marks her as either a Western diasporic woman in Indian space, or perhaps the modern Indian woman in the Indian city. These representations, then, possibly serve to create a moment where a single South-Asian female is able to dress freely and be on her own in a public space, without being hassled or sexually harassed by men.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, there is a gender and sexual ambiguity created in the video, where the independent woman as the *morni* dresses to impress, not only for herself but also for others to see and enjoy and perhaps to be inspired by. Who might these others be? With the inviting address of the music video, partly constructed to be an open platform that invites music listeners in from around the world, not least on music video sharing sites such as YouTube, the spectators of this video are most possibly young men and women of varied gender and sexual orientations, which adds to the appeal of the song being about a *morni* figure that is able to freely strut her/his stuff in private and in everyday life. A small section of the lyrics are also sung in English by a female backing singer who claims: “You got me feeling so, feeling so, you got me feeling so crazy”, which inserts a potential moment of transcultural desire and sexual energy in the video that

transcends normative associations of gender and sexuality, and they are not exclusively intended for those who only speak or understand the Panjabi language either. These lyrics are sung over the *morni* figure walking through the urban space on her own, juxtaposed with the male and female dancers performing hip hop on their own and with joyful expressions, suggesting an open interpretation as to who might be making them feeling “so”.

The “Morni” track features on Panjabi MCs tenth studio album *The Raj* (2010) and was eagerly anticipated by bhangra fans around the world, not least after his hugely successful hit “*Mundian To Bach Ke/Beware of the Boys*” (2003), on which he partnered with the US rap artist JayZ.<sup>5</sup> This track became a global success for Panjabi MC and arguably marked the arrival of the British bhangra sound in the global mainstream pop charts, with its regular airplay on radio stations and featuring on the UK show *Top of the Pops* and on music video channels around the world. By 2010 Panjabi MC had established an international reputation and *The Raj* became a much-anticipated album. The confidence in and of the “Morni” track, both at the level of lyrics (“Balle-Balle, Balle-Balle/Bravo-Bravo, Bravo-Bravo, Where are you off today again then, dressed like a peahen?”), and the stylised swagger of the woman are moments of arrival and celebration in British bhangra. The noughties of British bhangra music then can be seen to be marked by a global ascendancy where listeners other than South Asians were also able to partake in the music en masse, based on the rise of the remix DJ as artist as indexed by Panjabi MCs popularity and experiments with fusion, and by the articulation of a style and progressive social attitude that was expressed not only through the music and its lyrics but also through its accompanying dress. Thus, British bhangra in its own specific ways adds to the development of post-war British Asian expressive cultural practices.

In “Morni” several issues pertinent for the analysis of this article play out: the depiction of young South-Asian bodies, the journey and arrival of a music genre, and the representation of fashion and style politics in and through music and audio-visual media. Popular music and fashion have long histories and a number of studies exist in this area, not least in the post-war period: for example, Beatlemania as a popular-culture phenomenon, Elvis as an artist, or pop, rock or punk as Anglo-American genres have been examined.<sup>6</sup> However, in the case of British bhangra very little is known when thinking about the fusion of popular music and fashion. Existing research has primarily been presented through musical and lyrical analysis and the cultural politics of identity formation for its British Asian audiences and artists.<sup>7</sup> These analyses consider the socio-cultural flows of the fusion of music genres from South Asia, Britain, Africa and the Caribbean and US-derived rap and hip hop music cultures, and how these have informed post-war British South Asian and Black British identities for those who partake in the music. Contributing to this work but also developing a hitherto unexplored area, the fashion and style politics of dress in British bhangra will be analysed here. A range of visual examples are used to consider their socio-cultural possibilities for understanding British Asian bodies in order to make sense of transcultural socio-cultural flows in British bhangra. The study seeks to investigate fashion and related style politics in British bhangra music through a cross-disciplinary textual analysis approach.

Reading fashion in British bhangra in this way involves considering the possible socio-cultural statements that can be read from bodies, items of clothing and accessories. These statements might help to understand the style politics of fashion in British bhangra alongside some of the scholarly work on how cultural politics and identity formation for artists and audiences have been foregrounded. Reading fashion in

British bhangra also draws methodologically on interdisciplinary work in Fashion Studies (borrowing from anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and semiotic readings), where dress can be considered as a “situated bodily practice”.<sup>8</sup> By thinking of clothes and accessories on the body, work in fashion studies aims to draw attention to the dressed body in order to begin to offer a social analysis of fashion. In bringing bodies and clothing together, fashion scholars have explored dress to reveal bodies as stylised statements: that is as bodies in a given time and place, in motion, posing for photo shoots or represented through dress as they undergo socio-cultural and physical transitions across time and cultures.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, Joanne Entwistle in her important work on fashion and the body has argued for a need to think about how fashion is about bodies as it is produced, promoted and worn by bodies: “It is the body that fashion speaks to and it is the body that must be addressed in almost all social encounters”.<sup>10</sup> This is a useful starting point to consider the possible interactions of fashion and the body in British bhangra, not least in terms of how a sense of bodies has been fashioned in order to create personal and collective appearances across key stages of its development. Furthermore, fashioned bodies provide possible scripts that might be read off embodied British Asians as adhering to cultural norms and societal expectations of their bodies; or not, as the case maybe, especially where fusion-based fashion and musical cultures co-exist.

Reading British Asian fashion from the live British bhangra music scene and looking at clothes as embodied fashion on British Asians thus offers insights into the social and cultural flows beyond the musical form. This becomes apparent by considering two different but related examples: dress and fashion worn both by bands and artists, and by young British Asian audiences of British bhangra.

### **The “Soho Road to the Punjab” exhibition: Uncovering fashion in the display**

Source material for this article includes album cover work and archival information and photographs contained in a Birmingham-based arts exhibition of British bhangra music that toured nationally and which the author of this article co-curated.<sup>11</sup> The exhibition “Soho Road to the Punjab” was launched in 2005 at the Orange Studio in central Birmingham and then toured nationally in libraries, museums, art galleries and other public venues from 2005 to the present.<sup>12</sup> A first display of its kind, it draws on the personal archives, memorabilia, ephemera, images, videos and interviews of artistes and fans from around the UK to illustrate the histories and stories of key people involved in the development of British bhangra. In particular, it draws heavily on the private archives of music journalist Gursharan Chana (aka Boy Chana, the pseudonym under which he publishes and by which he has come to be known), to document his relationship with some of the founders of UK bhangra music.<sup>13</sup>

In the present article, I draw on photographs from the exhibition, as well on album covers from the Birmingham-based band Achanak, to read fashion and its possible style statements in this genre, which until now has not been commented on in detail.<sup>14</sup> Whilst the exhibition does not deal with fashion as an explicit strand or exhibition panel *per se*, I was struck by the endless references in the photographs and other visual ephemera to artists’ and bands’ dress and the wearing of garments by bhangra audiences. This reminded me not only how colourful the music scene of live bhangra was, but also that social and cultural statements were being made by those wearing these clothes. Tracking, analysing and commenting on fashion and possible style statements from live British bhangra music is not readily available due to a lack of collating and/or cataloguing until the mounting of this exhibition. There are available music videos such as the one analysed at the outset of this article on websites such as

YouTube, and they contain rich audio and visual material ripe for further critical exploration. Older videos of performances of artists in their regalia taken from VHS video tapes and post-war TV broadcasts also now exist on such sites, but these are sporadic and require contextualisation in order to be better understood. Drawing on some of the images from the exhibition and additional album covers reveals some of the diverse transcultural aspects of British bhangra (in this case fashion) that require further attention. The images used in this article correspond to a period of approximately 10 to 12 years from the mid-1980s to the mid-late 1990s. This is a time considered by artists, audiences and British bhangra scholars as the heyday of the live British bhangra music scene, which abated in the early 2000s to give way to DJs and performances via PA-systems.<sup>15</sup> This period provided the focus for the exhibition as it was during the live scene that arguably more opportunities existed for artists, musicians and audiences to dress up, revel in bhangra singing and dancing, and to be seen and see others in and through their dress.

Drawing on the aforementioned source material in this way also allows us to consider the “Soho Road to the Punjab” exhibition as containing archival items and ephemera relating to the lived material cultures of post-war British Asians.<sup>16</sup> By examining photographs from the exhibition and related album covers, British bhangra’s material past is uncovered through embodied fashion and potentially able to reveal something of it as post-war lived experience for those that contributed to the music scene. Reading images from this recent past in the contemporary moment also contributes to an understanding of individual- and community-based archival practices as an attempt at recording “popular music’s material past as it was lived and experienced”.<sup>17</sup> Equally, analysing this material past also contributes to “memory practices of the present”<sup>18</sup>. Here, the past is not just recalled for simple nostalgic



recollections but its remembering also aids in understanding the formation of the historical present where British Asian representations around British bhangra can be usefully contextualised and assessed as part of broader British Asian social and cultural histories.

### **Heera (1987): Blending folk and British bhangra together**

<insert image 1 and caption>

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This picture taken at The Dome Nightclub, Birmingham, in 1987 is of the west London band Heera (Diamond) whilst in performance. It tells of how traditional styles were developed alongside contemporary dress. Traditional folk bhangra dress was worn by male dancing troupes in the pre- and post-1947 partition eras in the north-west of the Indian subcontinent, particularly in the region of the Punjab. Here folk dancers' everyday work-wear garments (from labouring in the fields, to loose-fitting tunics, *kurtas*/cotton or silk shirts, and baggy trousers) morphed and became amalgamated as costumes through state-sponsored celebratory bhangra events in the post-independence era.<sup>19</sup> In this latter period, folk bhangra costumes for men consisted of a *turla* (a fan-like adornment worn on the turban), a *pag* (turban), a necklace which was sometimes worn with matching earrings, a *kurta*, a *lungi* (loose loincloth tied around the dancer's waist), a *jugi* (button-less waistcoat), and a white or colourful *rammal* (handkerchief). The more polished costume-like appearance of folk bhangra dancing teams took on an even more decorative and sometimes flamboyant appearance from the late 1970s. Early folk bhangra fashion acquired new significations through their mixing with popular Hindi film styles and then with costumes and accessories acquired through the circulation of international British bhangra dance and performance via the diaspora. Some of these transcultural exchanges and modifications can be seen in this photograph.

In the centre, Dhami Singh poses and sings to camera mid-performance as Boy Chana takes the picture, capturing an essence of the energetic concert. Both lead singers, Dhami and Kumar, seen here in yellow and blue traditional-style folk outfits with gold embroidered waistcoats, pay homage to the folk derivations of bhangra music singers and traditional dress. Three members of their band can be seen in the background dressed in white shirts and trousers playing on synthesisers, with the band member in the middle on Indian percussion drums. The photograph encapsulates a moment in bhangra fashion where older forms and the new, the traditional and the modern, the Eastern and the Western were blended in performance and style. Together, both sets of dress codes clearly mark Heera as an identifiable group through their performing costume. They also signify the mixture of musical heritages that the band used as part of the fusion-based genre of British bhangra music, and further indicate a style of dress that was mixed and matched by male and female bhangra revellers, who wore both Eastern and Western fashion. The white shirt and trousers worn by the musicians reference disco and Bollywood film music and style from the 1970s and 1980s, where the hero and heroine would sing and dance in white attire, creating a frenzied and lively performance. The British Asian body in this picture is in motion through dance and includes gestures of joy and celebration. It is also a body that is culturally and comfortably dressed to mark the musical act. The singers' hand gestures and other bodily movements were also brought to life through performative acts and lyrics that drew attention to dress and bodily adornments, signifying certain meanings for women and men respectively. More often than not song lyrics praised and fetishized the feminine female body, focussing on her eyes, lips, hairs, hips and fitted clothes etc. They often also referred to the intimacy of two lovers wanting to come physically closer; to drunken males playing in camaraderie; to men being hailed as masculine and

strutting their new wears borne from the labours of hard work. Lyrics in bhangra songs which focussed on these aspects, whilst also culturally ascribing to conventional gender ideologies, did so by playing up such conventions, but some of these same conservative sentiments were also flaunted and re-interpreted on the dance floors, through British bhangra dancing and dress, as young men and women performed and re-interpreted what it meant to be young adults in the 1980s. This included dancing in ways that moved beyond simple conservative displays of the body to both masculine and effeminate performances by men and women, to the suggestion and play of intimacy and touching whilst dressed in fashion with imprints of more than one cultural tradition. The mixing and matching of the traditional and the modern attire, dancing and performances, therefore, did not always confirm the socio-cultural status quo, but neither did it always detract from it.

The traditional-style items of dress worn by the two lead singers, and sometimes copied and translated by bhangra revellers, were initially imported from the Indian subcontinent and often bought in South-Asian high streets in Southall, West London or Birmingham, as well as elsewhere. In other cases, similar outfits were made, hand stitched and sewn on machine by female family members of the band who were skilled in *sina prona*/home-based skilled sewing and beading culture, and who supported a network for bhangra wear at community gatherings such as weddings and other parties. Anthropologist Parminder Bhachu has researched *sina-prona* culture in post-war Britain and describes its creative and limiting aspects in the following way:

The notion of *sina-prona* – literally translated, sewing and beading, is a metaphor for the many skills that constitute the making of a home. *Sina-prona* becomes a code for femininity, the making of a *suchaji* (skilled) and exemplary woman with a commanding expertise, with the appropriate skills

of domesticity. It is also about a creative domestic femaleness, the characteristics that define conventional womanliness, the sensibilities that govern the making of a competent homemaker and household manager. [...] I do not want to idealize *sina-prona* socialization because clearly there were and are many oppressive aspects to it. There are many fine feminist critiques of equivalent *sina-prona* expectations from women who were forced to engage in these activities and thus who had other ambitions thwarted. But there are also creative aspects of this domestic economy. These are some of the source codes defining the improvisational aesthetics of both the diasporic fashion entrepreneurs and the seamstresses who have taken these domestic skills in interesting design directions, cultural and commercial.<sup>20</sup>

Dress design and practice is alluded to in photographs and warrants further investigation of the material culture of fashion and the seamstresses who created these clothes. Pictures like this one indicate a starting point from the Soho Road to the Punjab exhibition and invite further exploration.

### **Achanak and the 1990s**

Fashion is also featured textually on the album sleeves of bhangra artists. The Birmingham based band Achanak's album sleeves for *PaNACHe* (1990) and *Top-NACH* (1996) depicts emerging urban British Asian fashion from the 1990s, expressing style with developed confidence, and reveals the use of photographic art on its respective sleeve covers. Elsewhere I have argued for an understanding of how these album covers were produced at particular moments in the development of British

bhangra and how they allow us to consider the genre not only through lyrics and music, but also through accompanying visuals and motifs:

The album sleeves do not simply advertise the album or single as a product for sale, they also visually encode meanings about the music genre and its artistes. The images are often produced through photography, by hand, and computer software technology and have adorned LPs, cassette tapes and more recently CD covers and their related publicity.<sup>21</sup>

<insert image 2 and caption>

On the *PaNACHe* cover, the studio photography is evidently following the lead of album covers from earlier bhangra bands such as the London-based Alaap or the Birmingham-based Apna Sangeet.<sup>22</sup> The eight band members of Achanak are sitting and standing in relaxed poses, smiling and laughing as if caught in jovial conversation. They are wearing two-piece suits with two members dressed in different shades of brown and the others in black suits. Their hair is short, apart from Vijay Singh and Ninder Johal's in the centre of the picture, who are clearly Sikhs due to their turbans, both of which adorn their dress. The suits they wear were given to them gratis by the former clothing company *Ciro Citterio*, which was founded and owned by British-Asian fashion entrepreneur Rasiklal Thakrar. Thakrar founded the *Citterio* label with shops in major British cities, and it was renowned for its Italian-styled men's suits. As a trade-off in some of their public performances and to publicise the brand, Achanak would advertise the logo of *Ciro Citterio* on the stage and in the credits of their cassettes and CDs. This mutual sponsorship goes beyond the economic as it also draws attention to the mixing of broader fashion styles from across Europe, in addition to the UK. The cosmopolitan look and feel of the cover is not only created through the relaxed postures and the smart

menswear that the band adorn, but also through a late modern sense of pastiche, a place where perhaps one would not expect to find continental European references in a British bhangra product – not least if one was simply going by its predominantly British and South Asian, north-Indian heritages. In any case, this would be to deny the hybridity inherent in the production and performance of the music with its lyrics, sounds and popular cultural references often taken from around the world, but nevertheless always nuanced and routed through the British Asian diasporic experience. In this way in the early 1990s the Italian suits are not just fashionable on their own, but they are so in relation to a particular use of the Italian menswear as a code for the stylish, suave and youthful as crafted through a British Asian clothing label. Ciro Citterio's own brand of Italian suits and menswear is as much a homage to actual Italian tailoring as it is to a stylised and pastiched version of the same in the British Asian context where high street affordable prices meet the mass consumer market, enabling young men to dress and codify themselves as British Asian and European more widely. The suits as worn here on brown British Asian bodies in the 1990s are more than just Italian, British or Asian and reference not just a sense of the “authentic” of either of these national and/or cultural markers, but rather a re-fashioning of them through stylised imitation and quotations.

Due to the use of such apparel in their public representation, Achanak were considered one of the best-dressed and more stylish bands on the British bhangra scene. Their dress sense and image as a band encapsulated an emerging sense of aspiration and taste amongst young British Asian men and women in their late teens and early twenties who were studying at universities or working in a range of occupations. At least two of the band members also worked as full-time paid professionals: Ninder Johal as an events management businessman and music producer with his label Nachural Records,

and Vijay Singh who worked as a secondary-school maths teacher. As in the 1970s and 1980s, making music was still a part-time activity in the 1990s, at weekends or weekday evenings. The album sleeve, then, also captures a moment where popular music-making and fashion worked side by side as an after-work and weekend activity. Bhangra fashion here announces the presence and emergence of a music scene with a growing number of performers and fans.

<insert image 3 and caption>

In the second album sleeve, for *Top-NACH*, Achanak depict what came to be one of their visual trademarks: to look stylish and experimental, whilst always attempting to represent their band's democratic formation. In this image we see Viv Nayar, the band's keyboard player, in the centre rather than Vjiay Singh, the lead singer of the band. The picture presents the band members as equal and the musicians as just as important as the singer. As in other album covers where bands feature, we see uniformity of representation: the members are arranged in an A-formation and shot in black and white. They are smartly dressed, mostly wearing black waistcoats and brilliant white shirts. The picture has also been digitally manipulated and enhanced with photographic software technology, creating a stylish atmosphere with an aura-like effect around the band. In both these covers, then, music and fashion coalesce to give meaning to the individuals of the 1990s who wore clothes which were modern in look, comfortable to wear and aspirational in outlook. They also merged with other popular art forms, such as photography, to give meaning to ongoing and developing British Asian youth identities that were locally British, European, as well as part of the South Asian diaspora simultaneously.

**Women and fashion in bhangra: Mohinder Kaur Bhamra's Gidhian Da Shingar (The Beauty of Giddha, 1984)**

Women have often been overlooked in media representations and early academic accounts of British bhangra, whether as artists or as audience members; though some studies have sought to redress this in their focus on either bhangra or its female counterpart genre – *giddha*.<sup>23</sup> The “Soho Road to the Punjab” exhibition includes memorabilia and photographs that reveal the presence of women in British bhangra music, and can be read in terms of their direct engagement with fashion and style statements.

<insert image 4 and caption>

On this album sleeve, we see a smartly dressed Mohinder Bhamra sitting in a photographer's studio space. She is wearing a red-orange with yellow and black floral patterned half-sleeved *kameez* (tunic), with a matching neck scarf, and this is resting in a V-shape over her shoulders. Her hair is fixed neatly and tightly in a *joura* style or up-do bun. The V-cut at the top of her tunic reveals her neckline and part of her chest to reveal her fair skin and draws attention to her jewellery. She wears a black and gold necklace with a heart-shaped pendant and gold umbrella-shaped earrings. She sits with a side pose to the camera and is looking ahead with an assertive gaze, off-centre to the right. Her eyebrows are shaped and trimmed, enhanced with black liner and her red-pink lipstick gives colour to her mouth. Behind her is an almost matching red-orange coloured photographer's curtain that not only provides a co-ordinated backdrop for her, but also complements and heightens further the clothes that she wears. The fashion of the dress is of the period, early to mid-1980s, with a floral print that can be described as retro harking back to the 1940s and 1950s, cut in a style that is unmistakably



comfortable, both in terms of the material worn and her material accessories. It is also one of assertion and independence. She is depicted as a lone woman artist fronting the cover of her album, and this in itself was rare, not least due to the lack of opportunities for women in the British bhangra music industry of the time to perform and record their own albums. Nonetheless, her pose and fashion are also indicative of a statement about British Asian women beyond the music industry and as part of wider post-war British society. The 1980s were a time of transition and flux, not least in relation to debates around race and culture as well as nation and multiculturalism. Debates in the mass media and at social policy level focussed on whether young British Asian men and women were caught between two cultures or considered themselves as Asian or British.<sup>24</sup> British Asian women were often overlooked in these discourses or considered as docile and secondary at best, hidden behind a British Asian patriarchal culture in which allegedly only men led. However, a focus on the fashion of women in these instances reveals a more complex picture in which women not only crafted their own styles but also contributed to British Asian society and bhangra music, and thereby were social agents in the making of cultural practices such as fashion and music.

### **Sangeeta and band: Crossing over**

<insert image 5 and caption>

In this photograph, Leicester-based Sangeeta performs with her band at The Dome nightclub, Birmingham, in 1986. The group is multi-racial with two female backing singers, black and white, and male white and South Asian musicians behind them. Sangeeta's music was renowned for its multi-cultural and World music influences. Working with west London-based producer Kuljit Bhamra, the band composed music

using instruments from around the globe, including the Middle East, Africa, South Asia and the West. In this picture, the singer wears a modern two-piece suit of the time and her backing vocals visually complement each other. They are literally suited to perform on-stage, appearing slick and presentable and their chosen attire signifies internationalism, as can be seen in the modernist designs on their 1980s style shoulder-padded jackets that are intricately decorated with sequins and fine embroidery. Their hair is free-flowing as they sing and dance, and they wear it long and permed, with the lead vocalist adorning a fringe cut. If as in the literature in Fashion Studies we are encouraged to think about how fashion is about bodies as it is produced, promoted and worn by bodies, in instances such as the one presented here we are able to decipher pertinent statements about the dressed socio-cultural and material body in British bhangra.

Entwistle places an emphasis on the social nature of dress when she proposes “that dress is an embodied practice, a *situated bodily practice* that is embedded within the social world and fundamental to microsocial order”; she goes on to further assert “that individuals/subjects are active in their engagement with the social and that dress is thus actively produced through routine practices directed towards the body”.<sup>25</sup> Drawing across and bringing together social theory that incorporates amongst other disciplines anthropology (Mary Douglas), classical social theory (Quentin Bell), the sociology of the body (Bryan Turner), discourse analysis (Michel Foucault), phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty) and cultural studies (Dick Hebdige), Entwistle’s work usefully situates a semiotic reading of dress on a socio-cultural and actual body in a given time and place that renders visible possible statements about body, dress and culture simultaneously. However, whilst Entwistle focuses almost exclusively on Western examples of dress in her theorisation she does not use any non-Western or diasporic examples to elucidate

her argument. In extending Entwistle's cross-disciplinary framework in an application to fashion in British bhangra it is useful to bring into the scholarly mix here work on hybridity which allows us to also consider how actual diasporic bodies can also be shaped by and respond to culture in and through dress. The work of important scholars in diaspora and hybridity studies, namely Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy, amongst others, is useful here. Although they have written distinctly and in different ways on the matter, what can be seen as a common thread in their work is an occupation with a critical interrogation and use of diaspora and hybridity as not just simply about one culture meeting another and creating a new third culture, but they have also drawn attention to the ways in which this process can often include instances of actual and/or moments of becoming where creolization, negotiations and contestations are also part and parcel of this same action.<sup>26</sup> Deploying a layer of hybridity studies, as it were, to the literature in fashion studies we are able to analyse further how through a hybridity of cultures a diasporic body is able to present itself in British bhangra, whilst negotiating the wider socio-cultural terrain of the day.

In the example above, Sangeeta and band, principally via her two backing singers are presented socio-culturally as multi-ethnic bodies through their physiognomies as brown, black and white. Here, an idea of an international multiculturalism is advocated by three women with different visible ethnic origins drawing on and performing to a fusion-based sound. Furthermore, these are actual gendered bodies as the front piece of their ensemble band who are using their bodies in particular ways – they are women who are smartly dressed, drawing on global and modern references through the imprints on their attire, and they have chosen to dress in a relatively modest way, even when they are singing about romance and intimate encounters in heterosexual unions in some of their song lyrics. They are also actual

physical bodies that are performing not only through song but through dance as well, with at least one of them with a tambourine in hand. Here, these women are using their bodies in their female form in a managed sense that avoids overt sexual display or suggestion and inserts postures and movements of uniformity and controlled fluidity on stage. Further, the bodies are also of artists as singers and performers in British bhangra that have used the language of dress to codify women in the British bhangra scene as professionals and complex: they are a trio of lead women together with their other multi-racial band members who are not exclusively British Asian in their sound or vision for British bhangra. The multiplicity in their dress and performance also draws attention to the ongoing evolution of style and its associated politics, certainly if juxtaposed with the previous image of Mohinder Kaur Bhamra, but also this multiplicity implicitly alerts us to some of the possibilities and challenges in overcoming tensions in British Asian musical cultures and the cultural identities of the period.

The mid-1980s was a moment of creolization in British bhangra where different styles, genres and instances of hybrid cultural formation could occur through processes of transculturation. This same period was also a moment facing the challenges of creolization – mixed racial and cultural bodies of young men and women could meet on and off the dance floor but not always through approval by some of the more conservative societal norms or conventions of the day. Furthermore, Sangeeta and her band, like Bhamra before her, are following in a tradition where women were present and performed in the wider music industry. Nonetheless the spaces and opportunities to perform for women in British bhangra were fewer when compared to male artists and they also faced sexism and unwanted advances at some of their public appearances, whilst also being paid less than their male counterparts in the music industry.<sup>27</sup> Sangeeta and her band's decorum and professional presentations worked through such confining

strictures not just sartorially but also as a counter-ideology that offered transcultural possibilities and hybrid openings through their music and embodied performances that used their art form to suggest other diasporic prospects. In this transcultural spirit, Sangeeta, together with her producer and band, performed at global music festivals, such as WOMAD, to attract new audiences to their style of British bhangra, whilst also aiming at the crossover market to further the sales of their music. Her dress can be viewed not only as evidence of the modern and independent women in bhangra of the time, but also as indicative of artists who were literally wearing their style and politics on their sleeve, as they aimed to connect British bhangra with mainstream non-South Asian audiences and listeners.

Until now, this article has focussed primarily on album art sleeve covers, by the band Achanak, and photographs taken from Boy Chana's collection of British bhangra during the heyday of its live music scene. Reading off fashion as illustrated or encoded in these images is one way of attempting to make sense of the style statements that were represented in British bhangra. The focus thus far has also been on the bands and artists of the genre as purveyors of fashion as mediated through their band iconography and their performances. What about the audiences of this music and their fashion?

### **Daytimers fashion: 1988**

“Daytimers” or “daytime bhangra gigs or discos”, as they were often referred to, developed out of the success of late evening and weekend events of the live music scene that were held at clubs and discotheques. In certain cases, however, some young people were unable to attend these late evening shows, and as venues were cheaper to hire during the day than in the evenings or on the weekends, club promoters saw an

opportunity to fill a need for a segment of the live bhangra audience. These daytimers were therefore welcomed by sections of British Asian youth as they allowed them to meet their needs and desires, but they were not well received by conservative sections of British-Asian society.<sup>28</sup>

In another photograph taken by Boy Chana at The Hummingbird nightclub in the Dale End, Birmingham in 1988, it features four female friends sitting on the floor, with their backs against the wall, perhaps relaxing before their bhangra revelling at daytimers.<sup>29</sup> They appear to be in their late teens or early twenties. All four are dressed similarly in red and black tops marking them out as a group of friends with similar style preferences. They have 1980s perm-style shoulder length hair with a fringe cut at the front, red lipstick and matching nail polish, and have red and black jewellery, clutch handbags and smart black shoes. They are all smiling, with one of them (top right) looking directly to the camera. The young women are aware that they are being photographed by Boy Chana and are dressed to be seen and to socialise with others. The woman second from the left wears a translucent black skirt through which her legs can be seen. Here, just enough skin is showing for the young woman to be comfortable with in her own clothes. However, it was “going out” dressed like this that led some conservative parents and British Asian community leaders to lament the popularity of daytimers and the perceived opportunities for young men and women to mix from different religious and cultural backgrounds, where alcohol and smoking was permitted, and clandestine relationships might emerge.

This image, then, can be read as telling about the fashion of the moment that was about growing up, as part of one’s youth gender and sexual identities, and also part of the opportunities to socialise and to look and feel good amongst peers. Of course by the end of the gig – daytimer or otherwise – such outfits not only allowed one to go out in

comfort and style, they also permitted young revellers to return home drenched in their sweat and smells of having had a good time out, where the body had danced and expressed itself in tandem with others. Bhangra fashion at the daytimers was an embodied experience where dress that suggested any hint of expressing one's gender and sexuality openly, especially for women, was often policed through watchful eyes by conservative elders and peers. Nonetheless, young British Asians found their own ways to negotiate or circumvent this gaze and stepped out with their bodies adorned. They found their own manner of expression through the pleasures of singing, dancing and performing one's identity through British bhangra. This often took on forms of dancing in combined non-Western and Western ways where folk bhangra met with dance moves from classical Indian, to rock, pop, urban British Asian and African-American street styles, and often with others (males and females), and by oneself – as if in a temporary elated trance. Whilst this body was mostly dressed in contemporary apparel of the 1980s, the moving body in dance was transformed and spanned across time and space from folk and British bhangra often simultaneously.

***Beam Up the Bhangra: Kaptain Kirk (1995)***

<Insert image 6 and caption>

British bhangra's Kirpal Singh from King's Heath in Birmingham is visibly identifiable as an artist with a Sikh heritage due to the wearing of his turban and beard and with Singh in his surname. There is nothing too surprising or unique about that; quite a few other artists in British bhangra also appeared similarly. However, what set him apart from other artistes was his stage act as Kaptain Kirk where, together with his band, he donned the possibility of fusing bhangra dress and performance with elements from

science fiction. In this final photograph, Singh is pictured as Kaptain Kirk in one of his regular outfits wearing a costume from the popular US television sci-fi series *Star Trek*. This was a favourite show on British TV for him whilst growing up as a youth in the 1970s and 1980s, and his bhangra stage name was adapted from that of the leading character in the TV series, Captain James T. Kirk (originally played by actor William Shatner in the TV series and films). Singh released an album entitled *Beam Up the Bhangra* (1995), which fused futuristic synthesized sounds with the traditional percussion beats in bhangra played on the *dhol* and *dholak*. Although his music was not fully appreciated by all, his playful style of bringing science fiction to bhangra, attempting to create futuristic sounds through musical and electronic experimentations, coupled with a dress sense that quoted Anglo-US mainstream popular culture, gives us a sense of the possibilities that were inherent in British bhangra during its heyday.<sup>30</sup> As this picture reveals, the body is up for new British and Asian dance moves, which are given further meaning and play through blending with an iconic reference from Western popular culture. Bhangra fashion in this manner was not only about style and wanting to look good, it was also about an exploration and expression of multiple identities.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst existing studies of British bhangra music have paid attention to its musical and lyrical compositions as part of an understanding of the genre's fusion-based transcultural flows, this article has offered an analysis of a music video, photographs and album sleeve covers to read fashion and its accompanying style statements. By drawing on the archive and images offered by the "Soho Road to the Punjab" exhibition and additional visual material, it has provided a starting point to locate and make sense



of some of the fashion on British Asian bodies in British bhangra. A textual reading of the photographs and album covers are also equally important ways of mapping developments in the genre where fashion played a role in the formation of post-war British Asian social and cultural identities. The fashion and style politics that were created in and around the music can be put alongside studies of the genre that focus on musical and lyrical analysis to suggest the possible ways that socio-cultural flows also existed through dress and bodies and how they might be read. In this way the “Soho Road to the Punjab” exhibition also contains evidence of material cultures pertaining to British bhangra as part of British Asian lived experience.

Collectively, the visual material offered here allows us to consider an embodied British Asian fashion that covers and is created by a socio-cultural and material body that is in dialogue with post-war British Asian cross-cultural formations. The exhibition and accompanying materials allow us to identify and make sense of dress and bodies in a given time and place (most notably during the heyday of the live music scene), of clothes and bodies in motion (not least through song and dance), and dress and bodies that are being shaped and transformed through an interaction with other bodies and fashion from around the world. The British Asian body that arises from a consideration of this material is one that is fashioned in a number of ways and that offers eclectic clothing, varied modes of being, different fashion practices and style scripts.

In examining the album covers and archival material they are revisited not as relics of nostalgia but analysed as part of socio-cultural and historical processes that help us to identify similar and distinct relationships, inter-textual references and wider significations between different moments and artists in post-war British bhangra. In recalling the historical past in this way the memory practices of the contemporary present of the music allow us not only to trace antecedent instances that went before,

but moreover to consider the present as an arena of dress, performance, style and related cultural politics that constitute the present in similar and different local and global ways. The cross-disciplinary approach to fashion in British bhangra offered in this article suggests its possible application to other related yet different socio-cultural sites in global bhangra. Two brief examples will suffice here: First, British bhangra has travelled around the world and has been translated and re-used in bhangra music in the USA, Canada and India, where it has been fused with contemporary folk bhangra and Bollywood film music. These journeys have created distinctive non-UK bhangra sounds. One example from this international itinerary of British bhangra's travels can be found in the New York City clubland space of DJ Rekha Malhotra's monthly club night, which has been running since 1997, entitled Basement Bhangra.<sup>31</sup> Here, British bhangra is remixed with USA bhangra sounds, East and West coast hip-hop, dancehall and electronic sounds in Manhattan. In the second example, British bhangra is also popular at South Asian LGBTQ club events around the world, where queer bodies take up bhangra singing and dancing and re-work some of the heterosexual gender and sexual identities represented in the music for their own needs and purposes. At such LGTBQ nights, the "Morni" track referenced at the outset of the article is often a favourite where men and women, men and men, and women and women perform on the dance floor, taking up and re-enacting the strut of the peahen to profess dancing prowess and express diverse gender and sexual pleasures. In both instances, we have globally situated South Asian bodies in different times, places and cultures that will also be dressed and fashioned in particular ways and with ensuing politics in and around the music. Here, fashioned bodies on different bhangra dance floors become mobile and stylised performing bodies in and through dance.<sup>32</sup> What kinds of socio-cultural statements and style politics are possible at these junctures as areas ripe for further exploration?

An account of fashion in British bhangra music allows us to think about the British Asian body in dress and associated practices as culturally located and socially situated in time and place. It also encourages us to make sense of British Asians through the materiality of clothing and in tandem with other bodies: bodies and fashion in British bhangra are inextricably linked. Just as the music and lyrics of this genre tell of British Asians being and becoming in the post-war period, so too the fashion via music announces presence and plays a key role in the presentation of British Asian cultural identities.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

#### Notes on contributor

Rajinder Dudrah is Professor of Cultural Studies and the Creative Industries in the Faculty of Arts, Design and Media at Birmingham City University, UK. He has researched and published widely in film, media and cultural studies in international journals. His books include, amongst others: *Bollywood: Sociology Goes to the Movies* (2006); *Bhangra: Birmingham and Beyond* (2007); *Theorising World Cinema* (with Lucia Nagib and Chris Perriam 2011); and *Bollywood Travels: Culture, Diaspora and Border Crossings in Popular Hindi Cinema* (2012). He is the founding co-editor of the journal *South Asian Popular Culture* (Routledge).

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The “her/his” is deliberately used here, as although the word “*morni*” in the song literally translates as referring to the female peafowl bird, and also to a young woman that the song is describing, both men and women are hailed in the song in its lyrics, the music video, and through its related dance and performances on the dance floor whenever this song is played.

<sup>3</sup> The official music video of the song can be viewed at:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6lCbe2iKgF0>, date last accessed 7 August 2016.

<sup>4</sup> The progressive sentiments of an independent and fashionable woman as depicted in this video are perhaps at odds with some of the more harsh realities of everyday women in Indian and other South Asian cities. In this context, media and police reports as well as scholarly studies have shown women in large numbers reporting that they do not feel safe on their own or even when with others in Indian public spaces, where fear of sexual harassment and violence towards women is an unfortunate daily occurrence. See for example: National Crime Records Bureau, “Crimes Against Women”; Solotaroff and Pande, *Violence against Women and Girls*.

<sup>5</sup> “Mundian To Bach Ke” (2003) was a re-mixed and re-release of the same track from Panjabi MCs 1998 album *Legalised*.

<sup>6</sup> See for instance: McRobbie, *In the Culture Society*; Miller, *Fashion and Music*; Mundy, *Elvis Fashion*; Iddon and Marshall, *Lady Gaga and Popular Music*; Millard, *Beatlemania*.

<sup>7</sup> Studies include work by Sabita Banerji; Gerd Baumann; Gayatri Gopinath; Sanjay Sharma, John Hutnyk and Ashwini Sharma; Virinder Kalra; Rajinder Dudrah; Anjali Gera Roy; and Falu Bakrania amongst others. See Banerji, “Ghazals to Bhangra”; Banerji and Baumann, “Bhangra 1984–88”; Baumann, “The Reinvention of Bhangra”; Gopinath, “Bombay, UK, Yuba City”; Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma, *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*; Kalra, “Vilayeti Rhythms”; Dudrah, “Drum n Dhol”; Roy, *Bhangra Moves*; Bakrania, *Bhangra and Asian Underground*.

<sup>8</sup> Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, xi.

<sup>9</sup> See for example: Craik, *The Face of Fashion*; Entwistle and Wilson, *Body Dressing*; Paulicelli and Clark, *Fabric of Cultures*; Black et.al, *Handbook of Fashion Studies*; Barnard, *Fashion Theory*; Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*.

<sup>10</sup> Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, 1.

<sup>11</sup> The “Soho Road to the Punjab” exhibition was produced and distributed by Punch Records, Birmingham ([www.punch-records.co.uk](http://www.punch-records.co.uk)). The exhibition section on album sleeve cover art was researched and written by the author of the present article. With thanks to Simon Redgrave, the key co-curator of the exhibition, and Ammo Talwar, Director of Punch Records, for allowing me access and permission to use and work with the text, images and research materials. The following written text about the exhibition and Boy Chana’s contribution to the archive are edited and developed summaries of the same as used in the Soho Road to the Punjab exhibition. A version of the written text relating to these contextualizing sections has appeared in Dudrah, “British Bhangra

Music as Soundscapes,” which should be read as an earlier and accompanying article to the one presented here, as they both draw from the same archive but for different subject matter.

<sup>12</sup> For full details of the exhibition, produced and distributed by Punch Records (Birmingham) and its curatorial team, and where it is currently touring see: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Soho-road-to-the-Punjab/382382245120529>, date last accessed 7 August 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Boy Chana’s private collection was made public through the exhibition; the full archive is available via Punch Records, Birmingham. Born in Uganda, Boy Chana moved to Lozells in Birmingham in 1972 with his family as a baby. During the Handsworth riots in 1985 he and his family were based in the centre of the uprising and they opened their doors to journalists who used their house as a media base during the troubles. Boy Chana’s passion for social photography and journalism began here, and since his days as a teenager he began to photograph and write about the bhangra scene in Birmingham and further afield, working with different publications, such as *Multi Mag* (Midlands based), *Eastern Eye* (a national British Asian weekly newspaper based in London), and *Meri Boli* (My Language, a Birmingham based bi-lingual magazine in Punjabi and English). He also DJ-ed at bhangra gigs and hosted a bhangra chart show on Birmingham’s Radio XL in the late eighties. In 2016, he continues to DJ at social events and until 2013 worked as a full-time bank clerk. Drawing on this experience and memorabilia, together with further research and curatorship, the exhibition team produced an eclectic display of text and images that offered a resource to map and explore the histories of British bhangra.

<sup>14</sup> In a previous article I have drawn largely on oral, written and textual sources from this archive and exhibition to consider how bhangra soundscapes emerged in the British Midlands. See Dudrah, “British Bhangra Music as Soundscapes.”

<sup>15</sup> For an account of the heyday of live British bhangra music see Dudrah, “Cultural Production.”

<sup>16</sup> On actual and digital archives and exhibitions as material culture containing objects, written texts, visual material and ephemera as contributing to knowledge about culture in and through material items, see for instance: Fritsch, *Museum Gallery Interpretation*; Baker and Collins, “Sustaining Popular Music’s Material Culture”; and Hirsch, *Digital Humanities Pedagogy*.

<sup>17</sup> Baker and Collins, “Sustaining Popular Music’s Material Culture,” 993.

<sup>18</sup> Baker and Collins, “Sustaining Popular Music’s Material Culture,” 994.

<sup>19</sup> See Shreffler, “Situating Bhangra Dance” for an overview of this history.

<sup>20</sup> Bhachu, *Dangerous Designs*, 138.

<sup>21</sup> Dudrah, “British Bhangra Music as Soundscapes,” 289.

<sup>22</sup> For more on bhangra art sleeves and an analysis of four different album covers, including Alaap’s *Dance With Alaap* (1982), see Dudrah, *Birmingham and Beyond*, 36-43; and on album art sleeves in a range of music genres from Anglo-US Rock and Pop, through to international Goth and Jazz, see Gronstad and Vagnes, *Coverscaping*.

<sup>23</sup> On women artists and audiences in bhangra and *giddha* see Dudrah, *Birmingham and Beyond*; and Bakrania, *Bhangra and Asian Underground*.

<sup>24</sup> For proponents of the “between two cultures” thesis see for example Watson, *Between Two Cultures*, and Stopes-Roe and Cochrane, *Citizens of this Country*. For critiques of

the “between two cultures” work see for instance Sharma, Hutnyk and Sharma, *Dis-Orienting Rhythms*.

<sup>25</sup> Entwistle, “Fashion and the Fleshy Body;” 325.

<sup>26</sup> A good example which would illustrate a common critical approach to diaspora and hybridity in these aforementioned three different cultural theorists is Hall’s essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.”

<sup>27</sup> On the challenges and sexism faced by women in the British bhangra music industry see Dudrah, “Cultural Production.”

<sup>28</sup> Dudrah, *Birmingham and Beyond*, 31-32.

<sup>29</sup> This picture can be viewed publically on the internet at:

<https://uk.pinterest.com/pin/346706871287116465/>, last accessed 7 August 2016.

<sup>30</sup> The music video for the title track “Beam Up the Bhangra” can be viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x9cPx7WCK08>, last accessed 7 August

2016. Cultural anthropologist John Hutnyk while reminiscing in an overview of live bhangra music states: “while those times were fun ‘back in the days’, my nostalgia does not extend to feeling I should hesitate to call bad bhangra bad when I hear it (I have in mind things like *Beam Up the Bhangra* by Captain Kirk”); Hutnyk, *Critique of Exotica*, 206.

<sup>31</sup> See the Basement Bhangra website at: <http://www.basementbhangra.com/>, accessed 2 December 2015.

<sup>32</sup> On the dancing body in bhangra see Roy, *Bhangra Moves*, chapter 8: Performing the Panjabi Body, 175-198; and on South Asian LGBTQ dancing bodies see Dudrah, “Queer as Desis.”



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