

Can't Stop the Beat: Bhangra on U.S. College Campuses

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Americans love the beats of bhangra and are curious to know more.



Columbia Bhangra



Cornell Bhangra



Drexel Bhangra



Northwestern Bhangra



NYU Bhangra



DA Real Punjabiz



Bhangra Elite



VCU Bhangra



Dancers from New York University perform during the Bhangra Blowout competition in Washington, D.C. The team won the viewers' choice award.

Every spring, around the same time as the Baisakhi festival in Punjab, college students from across America gather in a historic theater a few blocks from the White House. Some hail from India, some from Pakistan, and others from New Jersey, but today they are united in a common purpose: bhangra.

You can spot them from a mile away. Wearing shocking pink and green turbans and sparkling *dupattas*, the girls and boys

of the top U.S. university teams make quite a spectacle as they pass the gray and white stone buildings of downtown Washington, D.C. They are here to compete in George Washington University's Bhangra Blowout, the biggest intercollegiate bhangra dance competition in America. The first prize is \$4,000, a chance to appear in British bhangra singer Juggy D's new music video, and, of course, the right to brag all year long.



Above: Dancers from Northwestern University perform during the Bhangra Blowout competition. Above center: Dancers from Virginia Commonwealth University use the supp clapper. Above far right: Dancers from Drexel University. The team won second prize. Left: Dancers from Virginia Commonwealth University, who won first prize, perform at the competition. The dancer in the center is based on the Joker from Batman. Below: Students dance during a dinner for the participants.

For more information:

U.S. National Dance Week

<http://www.nationaldanceweek.org/index.htm>

Bhangra Blowout

<http://www.bhangrablowout.com/index2.html>



While bhangra has long been popular in the United Kingdom, it also has a substantial force on U.S. campuses—with a good portion of major U.S. universities, as well as many smaller colleges, hosting bhangra teams. Other competitions that have followed in the wake of Bhangra Blowout include Bruin Bhangra, hosted by the University of California, Los Angeles and Dhol di Awaz, hosted by the University of California, Berkeley.

“Bhangra is popular on campuses nationwide mainly because of the pride of our culture and our dance. People love the sound of the music and are very curious,” says Sohail Hasnain, a George Washington University senior who helped organize Bhangra Blowout in April. “It is also a very fun dance for spectators,” he adds.

Bhangra Blowout started in 1993 as a small event organized by the university’s South Asian Society in the school’s cafeteria. It then grew to fill the university’s theater, and finally to the biggest concert hall in D.C., the DAR Constitution Hall, an American national historic landmark. What makes this event even more unique is that it is organized entirely by the university’s

undergraduate students. With costs at an average of \$100,000 each year, a nearly 4,000-person capacity concert hall, a DJ flown in from London and a singer from India—it is truly a large undertaking.

All proceeds from the event go to Pratham, a Mumbai-based charity whose mission is to teach children in the slums how to read and write, the organizers say.

The night before

The eight teams chosen to compete this year read like a glossy catalog of top U.S. schools: Columbia, New York University, Cornell, University of California, Drexel, San Diego, Virginia Commonwealth, the University of North Carolina and Northwestern. Duke University and the hosts, George Washington University, put on exhibition performances.

The night before the competition, the competitors are feted at a welcome dinner on a rooftop terrace. Yet, despite the glamorous atmosphere, there is real work to be done—picking the team order. “It’s very important,” says Shahrukh Khan, a Virginia Commonwealth University sophomore of Pakistani descent. “The best is at

the very end, or just before intermission. It gives the judges time to have the performance sink in.”

Khan is happy to oblige skeptics with a look at his student I.D. card to prove his famous name is real. “Everyone is always asking me,” he says, smiling.

He reports that being on a bhangra team is like a full-time job, listing the many competitions he’s been to this year—not to mention the exhibition performances. Talking about the next day’s event, he says, “We’re the defending champions...and the founding members of our team are graduating, so it’s a pretty emotional thing this year.”

He’s been coming to Bhangra Blowout since 7th grade, and sees it as an important East Coast event that draws the South Asian community together. Bhangra Blowout co-director Madiha Malik, a George Washington University sophomore, says that it has been going on “for the past 16 years, so it’s a huge part of the culture. It’s become like a family tradition.”

Bhangra dancing is also a way to bring people together from the diverse South Asian diaspora—and beyond. Malik notes

Bhangra and Diversity

While the vast majority of Bhangra Blowout dancers were of South Asian descent this year, many students from different cultures are active in the bhangra scene. One of them is University of Mary Washington freshman Will Douthitt, who joined his school's bhangra team in 2008, and came

to watch Bhangra Blowout.

Douthitt was not familiar with Indian culture growing up in Virginia, but a high school friend introduced him to Bollywood music. "I didn't learn the distinction between Bollywood and bhangra until I got into college," he admits. After figuring out that bhangra was a unique dance form, he says, "I thought it was so awesome, I should be doing this."

His university team (left) is just one year old and has about 15 members. Only one person is of Punjabi descent. The rest are Caucasians, East Asians, and students from other parts of India. "I'm really into multiculturalism, so I really like the opportunity," he says. They are still practicing for their first competition.



Courtesy William Douthitt

that while she is from Karachi, her co-director, Anugna Kasireddy, is from South India. "Punjab is just where the dance originated. But at this point, it has become so much of a sport at schools...a lot of people are not even Indian or Pakistani," she says.

After a dinner of butter chicken and dancing with BBC's DJ Kayper, it's time to pick the team order. During this long process, chaos ensues. Arguments break out. This is a serious competition, and these teams are willing to fight for the best spot. Eventually, the organizers get everyone on board, and the final placements are made. As the teams make their exit, Hasnain predicts that he will get only a few hours of sleep as he still needs to do some last minute promotions to help sell tickets.

The competition

Bhangra is one of the few dance forms in which the women's costumes are less complicated than the men's. Backstage, one hour before the show, all the girls are dressed and ready while the guys adjust the length

of their *chadars* and sit patiently as teammates wrap turbans around their heads. They are tired from traveling, but overcoming it all with pure excitement.

Out in the theater, two giant video screens run advertisements for the Bhangra Blowout sponsors: including McDonalds, a matchmaking Web site, MySpace, a travel company and Tanmit Singh's Roots Gear, a Punjabi T-shirt company.

Still only a senior at Virginia Commonwealth University, Singh sponsors events across the United States, hauling along humorous T-shirts that say things like "Real Girls Do Bhangra." Earlier in the day, at a free bhangra event for the community, his table was easily the most popular spot.

"We want to create an urban culture within our community," he says, describing his business mission. "We've found people in our culture alter themselves in order to be cool and fit in." Singh hopes to show Punjabi youth that they can honor their roots and still be considered cool.

Bhangra Blowout was certainly the cool place to be that evening, which was

Shahrukh Khan of Virginia Commonwealth University (right) dances with another student during a dinner for the Bhangra Blowout participants.



illustrated by the turnout for the event—more than 3,000, a mostly full house on a holiday weekend. The show begins at 8 p.m., with the opening act, a trio of *dhol* players rushing down the aisles. When Juggy D comes on stage in an Indian tri-color jacket, the girls in the audience go crazy, shouting his name and waving their hands.

Soon, the Northwestern team is on: a cacophony of color, jumping, prancing and props. Each of the teams incorporates traditional instruments such as the *supp* clapper into their dances. Some of the songs are traditional, others are more hip-hop oriented, and some are from completely different cultures—such as the Spanish song *Macarena*. Basically, anything goes, as long as the audience and judges enjoy it.

All of the teams try some sort of acrobatics and feats of strength. Columbia spins its dancers around in circles on the shoulders of their fellow dancers, and other teams form tall and complex human pyramids.

Soon, it's Virginia Commonwealth University's turn, and they come out with a real surprise: the Joker from *Batman*. After a brief appearance in the beginning of the dance, he reappears at the end, asking the audience "You wanna see a magic trick?" He then disappears behind a curtain, only to reappear as a fully-costumed bhangra dancer—in complete Joker make-up. Again, the girls go crazy, and many audience members get out of their seats to dance along with him.

In the end, it may have been the Joker trick that did it; Virginia Commonwealth University defended its title and won first prize, with Drexel second and Cornell third. New York University won the viewers' choice award (voting was conducted via audience SMS) and seemed almost more excited, shouting through the organizer's speeches.

With the giant trophy in hand, Shahrukh Khan marched triumphantly off the stage into the adoring arms of his team. The next day, they would have to travel back to school to begin preparing for their finals—but tonight, they were champions.



Erica Lee Nelson is a Washington, D.C.-based writer. She and her husband, Indian photographer Sebastian John, married in New Delhi.