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Individual Response: Fieldwork Project

Bhangra is an energetic, folk dance and music form that comes from the northwest region of India and Pakistan. The first mentions of the dance were said to show up in historical records in the late-1800s. After India and Pakistan partitioned in 1947, Bhangra started to evolve as a dance and is celebrated during the time of harvest. Bhangra is traditionally danced to the *dhol* instrument, a large drum and *boliyan*, which are short sets of lyrics that describe scenes or stories from Punjab. The music is a central element to the dance since it commonly references themes of love, patriotism, strength, and celebration. Due to the rigorous nature of the dance, it originated as being a male only dance, essentially portraying females as weak. However, over time this dynamic has changed and my fieldwork project help shed light on how Bhangra through globalization has transformed immensely. My project focuses on how Bhangra in the United States is so widespread as a dance, while at the same time, here at The George Washington University, there seem to be more female dancers participating in the dance even though it is predominately a male dance. I worked alongside a classmate, Eric Ettorre to carry out this project.

We were able to meet with and learn diverse perspectives from four members of GW Bhangra, which is a Bhangra team at The George Washington University that has been around for more than three decades. In order to make the sample representative, we were able to select a native Indian female, two second generation Indian's one male one female, and one white

female. A broad common theme amongst all the females were that the most challenging part about the dance for them was the expectations people had. Gayatri Menon, who has been a Kathak (an Indian classical dance) for nearly all her life said, “Bhangra is basically like doing hardcore cardio. Females have a different body frame and size as compared to males, so it is naturally more difficult to do everything that our male counterparts can.” The other two females also said that they found the dance physically challenging but still extremely fun. The male also mentioned that some of the female dancers on the team are better than some of the males.

In addition, family has an important role in how the dance influences their children’s lives. We received a few mixed answers about how the interviewee’s parents feel about their decisions to participate in the dance at GW. Sophomore Ani Mohanty, whose parents are from the northeast state of Odisha in India and later moved to Georgia, have asked her to try and focus more on her academic life. This is simply because she would spend over 14 hours a week on average practicing and learning the dance. Hence, she decided to take a break from it this semester. But when we asked whether she would want to get back into the dance, she said she misses it so much that she is definitely going to make it on the team again next year. On the other hand, Akshay said his parents were very happy and surprised. But they definitely encouraged it as it tied it back to his roots.

Another peculiar thing we noticed was that Victoria Lewis who is from Ohio and does not have any Indian background had more knowledge about Bhangra and the culture of the dance as compared to Akshay Bhardwaj who is of Indian origin and whose family is from New Delhi. This ties to the point of how Bhangra is growing and evolving as a dance. Due to globalization and the interest in preserving this dance culture, Bhangra is so rampant all over the United States. As seen during collegiate competitions, many a times the songs used with the dance will not be

traditional Punjabi songs but rather be mashups of English hip-hop or fast beat songs with Hindi or Punjabi traditional music. When we asked whether they thought that the dance was losing its original roots, most of them said that it was changing but would still always have that historical and cultural aspect to it.

As previously mentioned Bhangra has become such a known dance in the United States, and The George Washington University is one of the key reasons for this. GW Bhangra Blowout currently enjoys growing popularity worldwide. Since its conception in 1993, Bhangra Blowout has become an annual tradition that has grown from a local cultural show to one of the most anticipated South Asian events in North America. More than a hundred collegiate teams from all over the country audition to compete in Bhangra Blowout but only the best thirteen or fourteen teams are selected each year. This shows how big and widespread Bhangra has become and it only seems to be getting bigger.

Finally, doing this fieldwork project was extremely interesting and fascinating. Being born and raised in India, I did not have a very in-depth knowledge about Bhangra. However, after watching numerous clips and interacting with people on the GW Bhangra team gave me a wide perspective about the historical roots and elements associated with the dance. Many things that we learnt in class such as the influence of family on music and dance, the gender dynamic, and also the globalization of dances was something that we were able to witness through the fieldwork project. The fieldwork project also helps to shed light on how in order to preserve such a tradition, it needs to become known. Over time there have been many cultural aspects, for example, like the Zampogna instrument from Southern Italy that have been lost because the natives did not take time to teach this aspect to the next generation. While on the other hand, it is

amazing to see how Bhangra has not only been persevered but is also flourishing form 8000 miles away from its origin.