

# »URBAN MYTH«: BHANGRA AND THE DHOL CRAZE IN THE UK

*Bhangra* is believed to have originated in Western Punjab (in today's Pakistan) as a rural male dance performed to the rhythm of the *dhol*, a large double-headed barrel drum, to celebrate the spring harvest. Soon after Indian Partition in 1947 and following the social upheaval that accompanied it, a dance called bhangra became associated with the new Indian Punjab's cultural identity. This phenomenon was encouraged and supported from the outset by the local administration and can be attributed to two main factors. On the one hand, from the first half of the 1950s, the image of bhangra as a symbol of Punjabi identity was spread outside Punjab by teams of bhangra dancers featured in national and international events (such as the Republic Day Parade in Delhi) and in Bollywood movies.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, what cemented this association among Punjabis and marked the institutionalisation of bhangra was the participation of dance teams in inter-college and inter-university youth festivals and competitions, which became more and more common from the 1960s, with the foundation of Punjab's first higher education institutions. To this day, schools and colleges are the places where young Punjabis learn to dance bhangra.

Within a short time, therefore, bhangra was established in the urban context, the rural dance being destined to become a nostalgic memory for the few who could claim to have witnessed it, as well as the ideal reference for the homonymous urban stage dance. The newer urban dance, which is still accompanied by a dhol player, is performed by teams of approximately

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1 In 1954, the Maharaja of Patiala sponsored a team of Punjabi dancers to perform at the parade held in Delhi on Republic Day. The leader of the team, Manohar Deepak, took his group to Mumbai and in 1956 bhangra made its first appearance in Bollywood movies such as *Jagte Raho* and, a few months later, *Naya Daur* (see also Schreffler 2002: 20 and Ballantyne 2007: 128–129).



*Fig. 1 – Punjabi students performing bhangra. Guru Nanak College, Phagwara – Punjab, November 2004.*

Photo by Laura Leante

ten to twelve dancers in costume, who present choreographies put together, following the competitions' guidelines and rules, by a coach (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>

The vast majority of Punjabis who left India (especially from the late 1950s, in the post-Second World War migratory waves) and brought their knowledge of bhangra to the UK, had seen or danced it in its urban form, and their acquaintance with it dates back to their own or some friend's or relative's schooldays in Punjab. Therefore, although most dancers will talk about bhangra as a traditional village dance performed for the harvest, as a matter of fact, what they have experienced directly is the staged performance, which has become consolidated in the past few decades.

However, the form of bhangra which is nowadays more in the public eye in the West – often attracting the attention of the non-South Asian mainstream media – is different again: a popular music genre which spread during the 1980s among the communities outside India, where it established

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2 Apart from the dhol, other instruments can be used to accompany bhangra teams, including the percussion *chimta*, the one-stringed lute *toombi*, and the double flute *algoza*. The dancers also use two kinds of wooden clappers during the performance: the lattice-shaped *sapp*, and the squirrel-shaped *katto*. A singer can also perform in the background.

itself as the means for immigrants, especially the second-generation youth, to assert a modern Punjabi identity in diaspora (Leante 2003 and 2004).<sup>3</sup>

This pop-influenced bhangra, which also claims direct descent from the rural dance, is actually a sung genre intended for dancing, which owes as much to Punjabi popular and folk singing as it does to dance.<sup>4</sup> (It is no accident, I believe, that two of the first and most influential bhangra stars in the UK, singers Channi Singh and Malkit Singh, were known in their schooldays in Punjab for their vocal skills, and never joined a dance team). This genre of bhangra is danced by individuals, both male and female, and the choreographed dance (considered 'more traditional') is referenced only by a handful of moves, performed at the discretion of the participants. Jokes about these stereotyped movements abound, and make some senior members of bhangra teams knit their eyebrows indignantly, remarking that the complexity and intricacy of the dance cannot be reduced to a few moves mimicking, for example, the act of 'screwing in a light bulb' or 'stepping on a cigarette end'. The real celebrities of this modern genre are singers and DJs, who have nourished a rich record market for the past three decades. Many of these artists produce, promote, and perform their music in both the UK and India, fostering that international web within which bhangra proliferates.

Both modern pop bhangra and the choreographed stage dance are regularly and easily accessible in the communities of the Punjabi diaspora in the UK, where one can always find posters in the streets and in shops advertising forthcoming shows, disco events,<sup>5</sup> or *melas* [fairs].<sup>6</sup>

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3 Roughly at the same time as the modern pop-influenced bhangra emerged in Britain, an analogous form of music started to spread in Punjab. It is not possible to talk about the first without taking the second into account, as the two scenes are part of the same web of music production. Much could also be said about the osmotic relationship between this modern bhangra and Bollywood music; the topic, nevertheless, falls beyond the scope of this article.

4 For the sake of clarity, in the next few pages, whenever possible, I will refer to choreographed bhangra dancers as 'bhanga teams', and to the artists and musicians of the modern western pop-influenced genre as 'bhanga bands'.

5 See also Banerji and Baumann 1990.

6 Interestingly enough, in the UK, contrary to India and other countries, there are no bhangra competitions. Occasionally, British teams try to raise funds to participate in contests abroad, especially in the U.S. or Canada, where these events are widespread and regular. When in January 2008 a widely-advertised international bhangra competition took place in Punjab, only one British-based team showed an interest in participating. Not having been able to find a

Other occasions of performance include annual celebrations, the biggest being the Sikh festival of Vaisakhi, which usually features (especially for its association to the Indian harvest happening in the same season, and therefore to bhangra) teams of dancers who follow the religious processions, either performing to the sound of a dhol played live, or to a pre-recorded, often heavily pop-influenced track. In fact, it is not uncommon for a team of dancers to choreograph a performance to some bhangra pop hit, and this reveals how the two modern forms of bhangra do not belong to mutually exclusive scenes, but, on the contrary, often intersect.

The establishment of groups of bhangra dancers in the UK preceded the spread of the modern pop-influenced form. In fact, a few teams were already performing in the late 1960s, made up of immigrants who had learned or seen the dance back in their days in Punjab. Some of the younger generation, in contrast, have experienced bhangra exclusively in Britain – although today’s communication technology allows Punjabis around the world to easily share a lot of their culture. Nevertheless, until a few years ago, in the absence of established teachers, those who wanted to learn often had to teach themselves, imitating the music and dance being played and performed at weddings or parties, or watching Indian movies and TV programmes. Jag Kumar, of the Nachda Sansaar team from Birmingham, told me how, as a teenager in the early 1980s, he started getting into bhangra when, with a group of friends, he decided to put together a dance routine to music by London-based band Alaap in order to enliven a school assembly:

We didn’t have a teacher to teach us, we were picking up movements and we were probably adding our little twist to the movements. We started looking at old videos from India – movies. And at that time there used to be a programme called ‘New Way New Life’ [Nai Zindagi Naya Jeevan], just specifically for Indians [...] we watched things like that. (Jag Kumar, personal communication – Birmingham, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008)

In a few months, Jag joined a team, started wearing a bhangra costume during his performances, and began to ask more senior dancers and dhol players for advice, since by this time he and his friends were committed to dancing bhangra “in the right way” (Jag Kumar, personal communication – Birmingham, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008). Stories similar to Jag Kumar’s could no doubt have been told by many of his contemporaries.

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sponsor to support the travel expenses for the whole group, only two members of the team went to India just to attend the event (Jag Kumar, informal communication – Jalandhar, 7<sup>th</sup> January 2008).

Nowadays most bhangra learners are second or third generation British Punjabis, who sometimes, like Jag, develop an interest in bhangra in their teens, while also being into western popular music; for them, though, the learning path is more straightforward, as they can easily join one of the numerous teams (one being Jag's own) which provide classes at all levels. Those who are more into the modern pop-influenced form of bhangra than the choreographed dance join or start a band with their friends; many others, finally, are stirred by the sound of the dhol and decide to learn to play this drum – a phenomenon to which I will now turn.

## THE UK DHOL CRAZE

So far, I have discussed how bhangra refers to different forms or genres: a rural dance, a choreographed dance performed in urban Punjab and in the diaspora, and a western pop-influenced genre which spread in the 1980s. Especially in the wake of the huge popularity of the latter, many people, in particular outside India, started referring to Punjabi pop in general and even to other forms of dance-oriented South Asian popular music as bhangra (see also Schreffler 2002: 17–18). No wonder, then, that such indeterminacy of definition can make it difficult to shed light, for example, on the first developments of the pop-influenced form of bhangra in the UK between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. In this period, in fact, teams performing the choreographed dance were popular in the Punjabi communities alongside folk singers, and both genres are nowadays often labelled as bhangra.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, what they seem to have in common is a certain character of 'danceability', which can be associated to the dhol and/or to a set of rhythms derived from the choreographed dance, especially the distinctive eight-beat swung trochaic pattern called *kaharva*. This rhythm and the dhol have come to signify 'bhangra par excellence'. In the UK in particular, not only has the dhol become a symbol of bhangra, it has equalled it in representing Punjabi identity. Here, a real craze has developed for the last 15 years in a unique way, so far unparalleled in other communities of the Punjabi diaspora, which entailed a change in the social status of this instrument and its players compared to the original Indian context.

Traditionally, *dholis* [dhol players] in Punjab, like most other drummers in South Asia, belong to communities of professional male players from

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7 An example in this sense is *Teri Chunni de Sitare*, the first album published by the group Alaap, often considered the pioneer UK-bhangra record (see also Schreffler 2002: 4 – note 6).



*Fig. 2 – Young British Punjabis playing the dhol during the Vaisakhi procession (Southall – London, April 2006).*

Photo by Laura Leante

low caste social groups.<sup>8</sup> Apart from very few exceptions, dhol playing is not sought after as a profession by young boys from outside drummers' communities, while many of these boys do aspire to join their school or college's bhangra team as dancers – an activity which will grant them visibility among their peers and which will often give lustre to their institution. In Britain, on the contrary, children of all ages long to pick up the dhol and to play the eight-beat kaharva rhythm. Here social class and gender issues seem not to be an obstacle, as both boys and girls from different social backgrounds want to play the dhol (Poole 2004: 20–23). The occasions for performance are numerous, and range from the private sphere, on the occasion of parties, to the public space. At processions, such as those held for the annual celebration of Vaiskhi, line-ups of young dhol players (fig. 2) usually follow at the end of the column, alongside teams of bhangra dancers, often wearing a T-shirt with the name or logo of their team while parading their skills.

In recent years the number of dhol teachers has been rapidly increasing within Punjabi communities in Britain. Local music shops and community

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8 For more information about dholi communities, see Schreffler 2002, 2002–4 and 2005b. To this day, the vast majority of dholis come from these social classes, although a few young men from outside these communities are starting to show interest in the instrument, an interest that is often due to its association with bhangra.

centres provide lists and contacts of dholis, or offer on-site tuition. Most importantly, some players with a stronger entrepreneurial inclination have founded large groups offering classes for different levels and ages. At the same time, they have provided a number of more experienced dholis for hire to perform at a range of events, including parties, melas, and disco gigs. The *Dhol Foundation*, the *Ministry of Dhol*, the *Dhol Academy*, and the *Dhol Blasters* are only a few of the best-known names. Some of them are twinned within the same organisation with bhangra teams of the same name, and the activities of the most resourceful include the promotion of workshops on both the dance and the dhol among schools outside the South Asian communities in various locations in the UK.

This interest has started to create a growing market for the drum itself. One of the largest Indian musical instruments retailers in the UK, London-based *Bina Musicals*, for example, have significantly increased the trade of their dhols in the past 15 years. They told me that sometimes they sell ‘even five or six’ dhols in a week. Their drums – advertised on their website as ‘bhangra dhols’ – are all manufactured in India (in different designs and sizes)<sup>9</sup> and imported from the main family shop in New Delhi.<sup>10</sup>

Most interestingly, dhol playing has developed as integral to, and at the same time separate from, bhangra bands or dance teams. In fact, as well as playing for bhangra dancers, more skilled dholis can join bands in which they are often the main attraction, supported by a group of other musicians (playing, for example, guitars, basses, drum kits, or keyboards). These bands have sometimes enjoyed exposure even among non-South Asian audiences, and have contributed significantly to the professionalisation and to the raising of the status of dhol playing in the UK. This somehow subverts the conception of the role of the dholi in Punjab, who belongs to specific low-caste social groups, and has a relatively low status.

How does the UK dhol craze relate to the traditional position of dhol playing in India? How do UK-based musicians articulate these differences? One of the things that I found most striking when I started discussing this shift of status with UK-based dholis, bhangra dancers, producers, and players was their lukewarm reaction. In fact, they would not raise the topic unless I did so, but would then proudly mention the popularity of dhol playing in Britain across gender and class distribution and its significance as a sign of social equality; they would not usually refer to how this could

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9 Further reference to organological issues will be made in the next pages.

10 Manu Sura, informal communication – London, 12<sup>th</sup> May 2008. See also *Bina Musicals*’ website ([www.binaswar.com](http://www.binaswar.com)) and the website of another major London-based retailer, *Jas Musicals* ([www.jas-musicals.com](http://www.jas-musicals.com)).

be seen, for instance, in India. However, in Punjab, UK-based dhol players are considered *amateurs* rather than ‘real’ professional players faithful to the tradition. The fact that they do not learn from a ‘proper’ teacher belonging to dholi communities is valued negatively, and the style of playing of these ‘half-baked’ UK dholis is often described as lacking the subtleties or nuances of the expert players, as well as the full mastery of the instrument and its repertoires.

The apparent indifference of UK-based Punjabis towards these issues may seem quite peculiar, especially when we consider that, through the equation ‘dhol = bhangra = Punjabiness’, this drum is a direct referent to India and to Punjabi tradition. Nevertheless, the paradox is resolved once one realises that as long as the dhol is perceived as an index of Punjab and its culture, it does not really matter whether the style of playing or the status of the player are the same as those in India. In fact, the dhol addresses not so much Punjab *per se*, but Punjab as an ideal projection, that is, Punjab as perceived by UK-based Punjabis.

India and Punjab emerge as essential aspects in shaping identity, but this identity is ultimately ‘British Punjabi’ and references the social reality of the diaspora community in the UK. Therefore, this identity is asserted through a double process entailing both ideal proximity to India (by addressing the Punjabi origin), and distance from it (as a result of the experience of the life in the West). This process also contributes to Punjab’s accession to a sort of mythical status, which emerges, for example, from the fascination mingled with vagueness with which many talk about bhangra’s origin as a village dance, and about the jollity of the harvest, and – of course – of the dhol.

Therefore, the key to studying the dhol craze in the UK is to look beyond its reference to India and to consider it also as a phenomenon establishing a sort of parallel, new tradition. In order to understand the character of this tradition, it will be necessary to take a few steps back and try to shed some light on its developments through the past few decades. At this point, though, the reader will not be surprised to discover that the early days of the dhol in Britain are shrouded in a certain haziness, as the emphasis tends to be more on today’s UK-based stars than on who brought the dhol to Britain, and when and how they started playing it.

However, it seems that the first UK dhol players did not belong to traditional dholi communities, who were probably too financially disadvantaged to be able to afford, at least at that time, the cost of travelling outside India.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, it seems these immigrants got to know about dhol playing from the drummers who accompanied their college’s

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11 I am indebted to Gibb Schreffler for his input on this subject.

bhangra team back in their school days in India. In general, these first dholis either kept a relatively low profile, or anyway never reached the status of celebrities which some of the younger drummers have enjoyed for the past 20 years.

Harbinder Singh, the dholi of the Great Indian Dancers, one of the first bhangra teams based in the West-London neighbourhood of Southall, was one of the few dholis of his generation to achieve public exposure in Britain, especially after the Great Indian Dancers were recruited to feature in a movie.<sup>12</sup> Harbinder, who had been a bhangra dancer in his college team in Jalandhar, settled in the UK in 1964, and only later resolved on playing the dhol, after seeing Amritsar-based renowned dhol master Ustad Harbans Lal accompany Punjabi singer K. Deep touring Britain. Harbinder then decided to go back to India and spend some time there to learn from Harbans Lal.<sup>13</sup> This kind of learning path is quite unusual and definitely not the first choice for the following generations of drummers in Britain: young dhol players do not usually take up this option, as they are already catered for by a growing number of UK-based dholis who can satisfy their needs. I would suggest that there would be little point in these youngsters going abroad in any case, as what they want to learn is actually the dhol as it is played in the UK. To fully understand this craze, one should also take into account two more aspects: first, especially for the young and teenage boys and girls, joining a team of dhol players affords a possibility to socialise and have fun with their peers. Secondly, one cannot overestimate the fascination of those dholis who have recently ascended to the status of popular stars, nourishing, as a result, the desires and ambitions of the younger generation to emulate their idols.

The emergence of these stars has surely had an impact on the development of a new youth culture associated to the dhol craze in the UK. Two players who can be considered emblematic in this sense are Gurcharan Mall and Johnny Kalsi – the founders and leaders of two of the most established dhol teams in the UK: respectively, *The Dhol Blasters* and *The Dhol Foundation*.

Gurcharan Mall, now in his 50s, moved to Birmingham from Punjab with his parents in the early 1960s. Here, he first started to play the *dholak* (a double-headed barrel drum smaller than the dhol), accompanying singers in the local temple, and then got into the dhol. During a recent interview, he explained to me how, like many of his contemporaries (and in a way

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12 Kuljit Bhamra, personal communication – London, 20<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

13 Harbinder Singh, informal communication – 28<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

similar to many UK-based bhangra dancers) he was mostly a self-taught musician:

My first instrument was the dholak [...] Everybody who started in music in olden days [...] they just watched films and picked things up [...] because in those days there was no one to teach us. [...] Before I picked up the dhol there was five or six [bhangra] teams. Some of them [the dhols of those teams] even went back [to learn dhol] [...]

When you join a team, then you start to learn things [...] When I started I wanted to make a progress and then this friend of mine was a dholi in [a bhangra team] and I said to him “Look, I wanna come along” [...] He learnt the same way that I learnt. (Gurcharan Mall, personal communication – Birmingham, 10<sup>th</sup> May 2008)

It is interesting how the musician refers to some of the dhols who were active in the UK before him as to those who “even went back” to Punjab to learn the dhol: in Gurcharan Mall’s words one can find the legitimisation of the UK dhol playing through a connection to the Punjabi playing tradition, while at the same time stepping back from that same lineage.

This process of distancing was somehow completed in the past 15 years or so by Johnny Kalsi, born in the UK to parents whose families had originally left India to settle in Kenya. A third generation emigrant, Johnny was brought up in the suburban areas of West London, and never visited his ancestors’ village in Punjab.<sup>14</sup> Although he claims to have been fascinated by Indian percussion instruments (especially the *tabla* and dholak) since he was a child, he started playing with dedication and commitment as a teenager, when he learnt the western drum kit and used to play it at his school’s events and assemblies. The first opportunity to play a dhol arose through an uncle, who had brought his drum from India and who, in turn, had learned from the dholi who accompanied the bhangra team of his college in Punjab (evidently following the same path which I have described above).

Johnny’s career as a dhol player was propelled when he joined bhangra band *Alaap*. After establishing his popularity with them, Johnny moved on to what would become a solo career with his Dhol Foundation. Unlike most British bhangra singers and dhol players, Johnny also managed to enjoy a certain degree of exposure on the western mainstream circuit, securing a deal with Real World. His look is very different from Gurcharan Mall’s more traditional bhangra outfit, and addresses a more contemporary, western-

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14 Johnny Kalsi, personal communication – Feltham, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

influenced British Asian youth. Most of all, he focuses on his image as a dhol soloist: his shows are built around him and a group of drum players. When we met, Johnny was keen to stress how he made enquiries and did ‘his research’<sup>15</sup> to find out about the ‘real Punjabi tradition’ and about the dhol. Significantly, though, according to Johnny, this research ultimately led him to think of some changes to make on his drum in order to obtain a *new* sound that would please him more.

## THE ‘ORIGIN’ OF A NEW TRADITION

The diffusion of dhol playing in the UK is also responsible for the development of a modern model of the instrument, in which the high-pitched goatskin is replaced by a plastic membrane, held by metal hooks which are screwed in the body of the drum, while the rope remains the means of tension for the low-pitch skin.<sup>16</sup> This new model has become extremely common both in the UK and abroad, including India, where nowadays most dhols are manufactured with the plastic head (Schreffler 2005a). This innovation seems to have been introduced as a result of the encounter with western drum kit playing and is attributed to and claimed by Johnny Kalsi.

In the previous pages I have discussed how both bhangra and the dhol craze developed in the UK as a phenomenon characterised at the same time by an ideal proximity to and distance from India: They claim in fact descent from Punjabi tradition, while at the same time revealing characteristics and innovations derived from the experience of life in the UK. The dhol, in particular, has acquired a new status compared to that it is accorded in Punjab, and it seems to have taken a new direction to the extent that it is often not valued or appreciated by more orthodox and senior bhangra dancers and dholis in India.

To me, what confirms the parting of the UK dhol craze from the Punjabi drumming tradition is Johnny Kalsi’s description, which he gave me during a recent interview, of how he introduced his changes to his dhol, namely a

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15 The theme of ‘research’ on Punjabi musical tradition is quite common in conversations, especially with second-generation British-born Asians (Johnny Kalsi, personal communication – Feltham, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2008; Jag Kumar, personal communication – Birmingham, 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008).

16 In figure 2, the first two dhols from the left feature a (dark) plastic head held by metal hooks. The goatskin tightened by a rope is visible in the dhol in the foreground on the right.

straight shape and the plastic head<sup>17</sup>. I think Johnny's narration can provide interesting perspectives on the analysis not only of the dhol craze in Britain, but also of its relationship with Punjab and of what I previously introduced as a sort of 'mythical' status acquired by the latter. For this reason, I will quote him at length:

I had a friend who was at college – a Pakistani guy, also Punjabi, and I took a trip with him [to] Lahore.<sup>18</sup> I wanted to find somebody to make me one [a drum] in the shape that I wanted. This was the birth of the new hybrid dhol drum, [in the] early Eighties. [It was] almost like an expedition – [from] Lahore [to] Jammu. [We] Took the trip on the train, found a mill – 'cause taahli was the wood that I needed. Now, [in] Jammu there's a forest, and next to the forest there's mill, but it's government protected. It's right next to Kashmir, the place is almost a warzone. You can go there, but you have to have people with you. I had to bribe lots of people with my friend. And we bribed the security, we bribed the millworkers, we bribed the people that de-barked the wood, we bribed the person that had to get [it] on the cart to bring it down. I must have spent maybe ten thousand rupees. Came down to Lahore, and then I found a mill worker. He said: "I'll make a dhol for you" and I said "alright, fine, no problem". The wood arrived, he put it on a lathe and he started carving. He [had] never made a dhol in his life, but I found out afterwards. [He] cut the wood, put it on the lathe, and he put a tool at one end. Don't forget, trees don't grow perfectly straight; they have to be made straight, right? So, started turning it, and mounted a tool with a point on one side to hold the thing. Eventually you end up with a straight piece of wood. Perfect. Then he mounts a very sharp blade. He winds in, as the thing is going around, and he cuts through. Then he turns the things around and he does the other side, then he takes it off and the middle falls out, and he goes "this is the start of your dhol" and I go "wow, this is amazing" and I look at the middle bit and [say:] "this is mine as well", and he goes "no, – says – that's mine". I said "what are you going to do with that?" He said "I'm gonna make dholaks and tablas". I completely got ripped off. It was my piece of wood,

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17 Although the body of the Punjabi dhol is curved, straight dhols are common in other areas of India.

18 The fact that Johnny Kalsi had a Pakistani Punjabi school friend is also a result of his experience of the life in the diaspora. The reason why he went to Pakistan with his friend and not to India was, however, not discussed in our conversation.

but he kept it. So, this argument went on [until I] let him have it, but we made a deal, so he would lessen the price of his machinery [and] his days of working. And then, on the last part of the drum he allowed me to work the machine and cut the grooves on my drum. I did all the grooves myself. And there was one more bribe on the way back from Pakistan: the security at the airport. They said “this is an instrument”. We went: “no, this is a plant pot. We’re going to fill it with mud and plant a tree”. [We] got away with it. Brought it back, and when I got it back then I drilled the holes, took the hooks off my old drum, and put it on the new one, and then mounted the rope, and the sound was unbelievable. (Johnny Kalsi, personal communication – Feltham, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2008)<sup>19</sup>

Several details in Johnny’s story are consistent with the description of dhol making in Punjab provided by Gibb Schreffler (2005). According to Schreffler, in fact, the majority of dhols marketed in Punjab are made from *taabli* (Indian rosewood) or mango trees, both common in Northern India. The woods come from the forests in Uttar Pradesh and are initially carved by craftsmen in the same region<sup>20</sup> using a lathe and a flat wedge-shaped blade like those employed by the novice instrument maker/mill worker in Lahore for Johnny Kalsi. Similarly, it is usual practice to use the wood remnant after the dhol shell has been carved to make dholaks and tablas (Schreffler 2005).

However, what struck me in Johnny’s story was not so much the content, but rather the narrative strategy that he adopted. What was presented to me was in fact a sort of ‘myth of origin’ not only of the ‘new hybrid dhol’, as he calls it – the one with the high pitch plastic head – but also of the ‘modern dhol drumming tradition’, so popular nowadays among Punjabis in the UK<sup>21</sup>. (While listening to his narration I could not help figuring him

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19 In order to facilitate the reading of this quotation, most of the ellipses were omitted from the text.

20 Schreffler mentions one town in particular, Amroha: “Amroha is a sort of ‘Dholak City’; in certain areas, everywhere you look people are working on some stage of the manufacture of *dholaks* (many more *dholaks* are made than *dhols*, for obvious reasons). If you see a *dhol* in a shop in Punjab, it has more than likely come from Amroha” (Schreffler 2005).

21 A shorter version of the story was written by Johnny Kalsi himself for his blog (Kalsi 2006). This version, though, omits many of the details present in the interview quoted in this article and does not present some of the stylistic features, more common in oral narratives, which made me first think of this story as a sort of ‘myth’.

as a sort of Prometheus taking [stealing] the dhol [fire] from South Asia [Olympus] to bring it to Britain and give it to British Asians [mankind] to start a new musical tradition.)

It is not my intention to doubt the truth of the events as described. However, I suggest that applying a metaphorical reading to the story can unveil more stimulating interpretations. For instance, the fact that the millworker who carved the drum had never made a dhol before can be seen as a way to further reinforce Johnny's process of distancing himself from the existing dhol drumming tradition in Punjab.

Moreover, if we take the story as a whole, at a macroscopic level one can easily identify the two main geographic locations in which Johnny's dhol is crafted – Lahore and UK – with what Jurij Lotman would have defined as textual *topoi* (i.e. narrative spaces defining a semantic continuum); these *topoi* are charged with clearly distinct semantic relations, Western Punjab (in which bhangra is believed to have originated) and modern-day communities of the Punjabi diaspora respectively. As the protagonist, Johnny is the figure who moves across the *topoi*'s borders, brings the story forward, and acts as a *trait d'union* between the two cultures, bridging the gaps between them (Lotman 1977).

He emerges thus as the hero-agent who, together with his helper-friend, has to accomplish a number of tasks, including travelling to Jammu (another *topos*) in spite of the dangers in the area, bribing the people working at the mill ('custodians' of the taahli wood), enduring the requests of the ambiguous helper/mill worker in Lahore, and, finally, sagaciously devise a way (this time bribery needs to be accompanied by the trick of the plant pot) in order to cross the last border (in this case, a physical one) before reaching Britain.

The narration makes recourse to several stylistic features typical of oral narratives, the most striking probably being repetition ("we bribed the security, we bribed the millworkers, we bribed the person that de-barked the wood, we bribed the person that had to get [it] on the cart"), and the positioning of places and actions in a hazy spatial<sup>22</sup> and temporal dimension. In particular, although a rough time reference is given (the trip to Pakistan is said to have taken place 'in the 1980s'), the chronological succession of the events is not informed by their temporal scale: for instance, the stages of wood cutting and carving are described with no reference to the length of the processes, which can take up to several weeks (Schreffler 2005). This contributes to the projection of the narration into a timeless space, and

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22 "[In] Jammu there's a forest, and next to the forest there's mill" (Johnny Kalsi, personal communication – Feltham, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2008).

thus to envelope it with a mythical aura<sup>23</sup>. In other words, Johnny Kalsi's story presents that 'double structure, altogether historical and ahistorical' which – according to Lévi-Strauss – characterises myth (Lévi-Strauss 1968: 209–210). Most importantly, if “mythical thought always progresses from the awareness of oppositions toward their resolution” (Lévi-Strauss 1968: 224), then this story emerges as a possible explanation – and can be said to resolve – the controversial relationship between the dhol tradition in Punjab and the recent craze in the UK: in fact, while still acknowledging the South Asian descent of his drum (again, the drum standing for a whole tradition), Johnny backs away from it, by describing how his dhol was carved out of taahli wood in Punjab, but was actually equipped with the new features and completed in the UK.

If Johnny Kalsi's story can be read as a myth of the origin of the modern dhol and of the UK dhol craze, then, at the same time, India emerges as a mythical place. It is no accident, I believe, that many British Punjabi children, as soon as they hear that some elder relative or friend is going to Punjab, ask them to bring back as a present for them a dhol – which of course in the vast majority of cases does not happen, the size and weight of the instrument and the airlines' luggage fees being among the most obvious deterrents. Most interestingly, though, the drum they would be most likely to receive would not be different from one of those they can easily buy a few hundred yards from their homes in Britain in one of the music shops which import them from India at quite reasonable prices. Again, the value of the dhol they long to have is not so much in the instrument *per se*, but in its symbolic connection to India.

## CONCLUSIONS

Elsewhere, I have argued that the key to understanding how British Asian identity is expressed and asserted through music is to be sought in the ambiguity between 'self' and 'other', between what is perceived as 'familiar' or 'alien', which permeates the life of UK-based Punjabis, who are exposed to both South Asian and western culture (Leante 2004). Moreover, one must bear in mind that a similar ambiguity characterises the relationship of British Punjabis with India: Punjab, in fact, is an essential reference in claiming cultural descent and separation. It is the convergence and concurrence of proximity to and distance from India that shape both bhangra and dhol playing in the UK. The way in which each individual

23 “What gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern described is timeless” (Lévi-Strauss 1968: 209).

positions himself with respect to these dynamics of proximity and distance depends on his or her own experience: I have illustrated how different first, second, or third generation emigrants got to know and became involved in Punjabi music and dance in Britain. Without wishing to risk simplistic generalisations, though, it could be argued that by affirming its link with Indian tradition, bhangra (especially the choreographed dance) virtually brings Punjab 'here and now' into the community of diaspora, among British Punjabis; by stepping back from that same tradition, it legitimises new developments in music and playing styles, which unveil more explicitly the experience of life in the diaspora.

Dhol playing in the UK has recently developed as a new phenomenon, parallel and autonomous to the tradition in Punjab to the extent that the diffusion of the new model of the drum (apparently resulting from the encounter with western drum kit playing) is ascribed to UK-based players. The British dhol craze, heavily frowned upon by dholis in India, has established itself as a phenomenon based on a new social background and has nourished a pop-like star-system which attracts many young Punjabis in the diaspora. This seems to have been facilitated from the beginning by distance from Punjab (in physical as well as figurative terms) and, at the same time, by close association to bhangra (both in its popular music incarnation and as a choreographed dance), and through bhangra the Punjabi tradition. India emerges ultimately as a mythical place, longed-for but essentially distant. Nevertheless, it remains an essential reference addressed as the result of an ideal projection, a necessary aspect in shaping and asserting identity, although this identity is actually 'British Punjabi' and references the experience of the diaspora in the UK.

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