

## Vernacular Music and Dance of Punjab

**Gibb Stuart Schreffler**

*U.C. Santa Barbara*

The field of Punjabi music is marked by an interaction between Punjabi music as contemporary practice and Punjabi music as people imagine it. In order to understand the state of vernacular music in Punjab it is instructive to devise a classificatory schema consisting of a few objectively determined, yet liberally conceived, musical subtypes. Following such a framework, this paper will describe how Punjabi musical activity manifests within each category, as well as how it has changed over time. Special note is taken of how ideas held *about* Punjabi vernacular music have themselves affected the development of music to its present form. Through a review of existing scholarship on Punjabi music it will be possible to delineate areas of future research.

Music is one of many realms that distinguishes Punjab<sup>1</sup> as a cultural area. Given its importance, music is a mode through which Punjabis display their identity. Vernacular music and dance of Punjab both embody regional characteristics of the Punjab and index change in its society over time. The stories about Punjabi identity that are narrated through music evoke images which Punjabis use to particularize their ethnicity both within the Punjab and in diasporic communities around the globe. However, interpretive notions such as "traditional" and "modern," with which audiences assess the quality and "correctness" of musical performances, tell us more about how they perceive their own identity as Punjabis than they tell us about the music's stylistic classification. With this in mind I outline a framework which will help to understand the changing dynamics of Punjabi vernacular music and its relation to Punjabi identity.

In this paper I delineate the major types of music based on how it relates to people: 1) Who produces this music? How? and 2) Who listens to this music? How? Thus the focus is on the music *in relation to people*. This proves to be a more productive indicator of the significance of a performance than would be the comparison of forms. For each of these types I then briefly describe the *state of the art*, that is, its history, development, and present status. This is where we will see most clearly how Punjabi vernacular music can be read as a history of the changing Punjab. Finally, I will address the *state of the scholarship* in each category, in order to identify the areas most in need of further research.

The label "vernacular" generally refers to those aspects of culture 1) which emerge as distinct products of a particular region and 2) which have been

familiar to a broad base of its population *at some point in time*. Thus if we casually speak of “Punjabi vernacular music” we are primarily describing music containing elements which were in some way specific to the regional culture of Punjab. However, inclusion on the basis of this criterion *alone* would yield quite a broad range of music. Consider for example:

- A performance by *tabla* virtuoso Zakir Hussain—in the playing style of the ‘Punjab *gharanha*’;
- A hootenanny-style group-sing by members of the 3HO—which contains Gurbanhi;
- A Bollywood musical number—which has appropriated Punjabi rhythms and motifs.

While these examples technically fulfill the criteria of being connected to Punjab’s culture, many would subjectively finesse the definition so as to include only music with a stronger relationship to the region or a higher percentage of traits that are widely accepted as being distinctly “Punjabi.” To fulfill the definition of “Punjabi vernacular music” an example should then also meet the second criterion of being familiar to and, moreover, *comprehensible* to a broad segment of the Punjab population. This reflects the major factor that usually distinguishes vernacular music from “art” or “classical” music, the latter being truly familiar to a relatively elite segment of the population. It is also important to note that these criteria need hold only for a given point in time, and not necessarily for the present. For example, a song which is no longer well known to most Punjabis can still be considered a piece of vernacular music.

When vernacular music becomes familiar to people through person-to-person contact it is referred to as “folk music,” and when it becomes familiar to people through mass media (e.g. audio recordings, music video) it is labeled “popular music.” However, the usage of these terms is oftentimes highly subjective, as much in the Punjab as anywhere. Ironically nowadays, music conventionally labeled “folk” is more commonly spread by mass media, and so-called “popular music” is commonly used at many traditional functions once accompanied by “folk” music. For example, a great number of so-called “folk” songs are learned not in a traditional context, but rather from commercial recordings. And vice versa, commercial recordings blaring over a public address system have become a feature at some places of worship.

While some song texts and general information about musician classes are included in colonial-era works like Rose (1883),<sup>2</sup> indigenous writing on Punjabi vernacular music did not fully emerge until the publication of the books *Punjabi Git* by Pandit Sant Ram (1927, Hindi) and *Punjab de Git* by Pandit Ram Sharan Das (1931, Punjabi [Shahmukhi]).<sup>3</sup> These were shortly followed by Davinder Satiarhi’s classic work entitled *Giddha* (1936). A dozen or so more works by Punjabi authors appeared up through the 1960s, such as Randhava and Satiarhi’s *Punjabi Lok Git* (1960). For the most part the emphasis of these

works was on *lok git* or “folk song” and their content consisted mostly of the reproduction of song texts. In other words it was the *literature* aspect of Punjabi music that was best represented.<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking song texts that can be written and instruments that can be illustrated have dominated writing and research on this area of *lok git*.

Recently new work and surveys on Punjabi music have paved the way for a greater understanding of the field. Very general articles on the Pakistani and Indian Punjabs, by Nayyar and Middlebrook, appeared in a world music encyclopedia in 2000. Also, in 1999, Alka Pandey published *Folk Music & Musical Instruments of Punjab*, a well-rounded discussion of Punjabi music. The strengths of this latter work include many interview vignettes of actual contemporary performers, as well as an extensive cataloging of instruments. However, as it was a “first-pass” study the author could not, nor did she pretend to, supply the level of detail or analysis still required for a full volume on the subject.

## I. Auxiliary Types of Punjabi Music

**I.1. Punjabi Film Music.** Though built on a similar paradigm as Hindi films, Punjabi films have their own flavor. A notable peculiarity in their musical sequences is the preference for scenes in which the main actors are not seen singing (or mouthing) the song themselves, but rather they are seen watching a staged performance by others. These films also display their own distinct Punjabi dancing style. The music itself typically mirrors the Hindi film song style or else can be understood as interchangeable with Punjabi pop music and commercial “folk” music.

**I.2. Sikh Sacred Music (*gurmat sangit*).** The text of the Guru Granth, Sikh scripture, is organized after 31 musical modes or *rag*-s, which are performed by sacred musicians or *ragi*-s as part of Sikh congregational worship and other ceremonies. While this music is *experienced* by the congregants as “folk” (i.e. when participating in worship), it represents the classical art tradition given its trained performers and style. The literature about this music is written almost entirely by orthodox sacred musicians, who have concerned themselves primarily with details of music theory (e.g. Harmindar Singh 1988, Gian Singh 1996 [1961], Tara Singh 1991).<sup>5</sup> Perhaps more central to the current topic is the group singing of hymns, *kirtan*, or other sacred songs of Punjab’s religious communities where the common folk of the congregation are the principle agents in the performance.<sup>6</sup> The latter kind of music would fit within the category of participatory folk music.

**I.3. Music and Dance of the Diaspora.** This heterogeneous category broadly includes the music performed and recorded outside of the Punjab. While some of it reproduces the styles current in the Punjab, it can be quite distinct, especially in the case of diaspora popular music. It emerged as a

distinct area of Punjabi musical activity beginning with the full development of *bhangra* music in Britain by the early 1980s, followed by its spread through other Western countries in the 1990s. It continues in the activities of performers and audiences around the world in what can be called a *cosmopolitan* Punjabi music scene.

Diaspora Punjabi music, often glossed over with the label “*bhangra*,” first attracted scholarly attention in 1988 when Banerji reported on the contemporary state of British *bhangra*.<sup>7</sup> Since then, several studies have been interested in *bhangra* for its capacity to help negotiate concepts of identity for second-generation South Asian youths. Western-based scholars are responsible for most of this work, which makes up a considerable percentage of the total writing on Punjabi vernacular music. So-called “*bhangra*” dance in its diaspora form is also currently attracting much interest as a topic of study among amateur scholars, which can be observed by activity on the Internet. An upcoming article by this author (Schreffler, forthcoming) contextualises the diaspora *bhangra* dance phenomenon in relation to earlier forms of *bhangra* dance.

## II. Primary Types of Punjabi Music

**II.1. Amateur and Participatory Folk Music.** This category includes music performed by laypersons or amateurs, those considered “untrained,” or those who otherwise would not label themselves as “musicians.” It is “folk” music in the most romantic sense because a large segment of the population can easily produce it and because it is considered their birthright to do so. Music in this category manifests most often in the form of singing. Individuals generally perform it for themselves and, especially, in groups. Its common contexts are festivals and holidays, social gatherings and group rituals, games, and during work. Also included here are the songs and the amateur music making that accompanies dance. Some examples are:

**Wedding time songs:** *Ghorhi, suhag* – Songs sung in advance of a wedding by women in the groom’s and bride’s house respectively which address the “heroism” of the groom and expectations for married life. *Hear, chhand parage* – Spontaneous, short verses of call and retort. *Sithanhi* – Playful insults used by the bride’s side to cut-down the groom’s family to soften the tension of their unequal status.

**Lamentation songs:** *Kirana/vainh* – A wail performed by a woman solo.  
<sup>8</sup>*Alahaunhi* – A breast-beating dirge by a group of women, led by a Mirasan or Nain.<sup>9</sup>

**Game songs:** *Kikali* – To accompany a whirling dance-game performed by girls.

**Work songs:** *Trinjhan* – Songs sung by women to pass the time while spinning yarn. Lullabies – *lori*.

**Music for Dance:** Songs that accompany *jhummar, sammi, dandas*, etc.

Playing of simple instruments with men's *giddha*, such as *kato*, *chika*, *gharha*, *chimta*, *bughdu*, etc.

**Multipurpose or casual genres of verse:** *Boli* – A “one line” verse, often linked together with others into longer sets, and capable of expressing much in a short space. *Dhola* – A West Punjabi form, of variable length, often expressing sentiments of great longing and romance. *Mahia* – A “three line” verse containing one line primarily for the purposes of rhyme followed by two lines addressing a beloved.

The repertoire of amateur folk music consists largely of songs perceived as “traditional.” While people are reluctant to attribute authorship to these “traditional” songs, in reality, many such folk songs did not simply emerge as collective creations, but as deliberate compositions by a single individual. Since the advent of recording it is sometimes possible to identify an “original” version and composer for a given song which, after having been embraced by a community, is now so common that most people assume the song to be “traditional.” In the case of songs composed before audio recording, or those which are otherwise never documented in another fixed form (i.e. writing), it is usually impossible to determine the source, and these works are automatically privileged with receiving the “traditional” label. Thus in Punjab, as in many parts of the world, there is a tendency to correlate “folk” music with some pre-modern era of unspecified length, and to contrast it with the subsequent products of the “modern” era. It is important to understand however, that the term “folk” is applied by Punjabis to a host of products of both pre-modern and modern times. My own usage of “folk” here is a conventional one that emphasizes often (but not always) direct transmission of repertoire and the perception of traditionality.

There is much talk about the “death” of the traditions of amateur folk music, but much less talk of the new traditions that are constantly in creation. Nevertheless, the feeling of loss associated with the disappearance of these traditions is understandable. Any disappearance of a way of life that one has grown to appreciate—or at least grown accustomed to—is bound to have such an effect. The experience here is perhaps exaggerated however, given the fact that the perception of “timeless” pre-modern traditions compounds the intensity of the nostalgia. It may also be said that though one may recognize change as inevitable, in the Punjab as in other societies the rate of social change has increased in the last century. Such a scenario gives many individuals the feeling that in their lifetime alone drastic changes have taken place. A general rule of culture applies here—we cannot “preserve” or “freeze” an art form; at best we can attempt to record the state of the art at a given time. And with this in mind we should understand amateur folk music and other types as *ways of making music by certain individuals*, not as any particular song or piece of music which may fall in or out of usage.

In the sphere of amateur folk music in Punjab the key change over time has been in how songs are learned. Whereas earlier the primary vehicle of

transmission was via direct person-to-person contact, there has been a move to the mass transmission of recorded media. The diversity of the repertoire has, in turn, been affected by this mass transmission as well as social changes in general. The older songs are, as expected, remembered better in the villages. So long as the rituals and events themselves with which these songs are meant to be sung continue to exist, the songs too may exist since they will have relevance. Still, it also comes down to the factors of time and interest on the part of successive generations to keep up the repertoire of previous generations. Thus even while the older music continues to accompany rituals, it may be the case that only the minimum repertoire is perpetuated. In other words, the issue is one of practicality: why remember ten different songs that all serve the same function, when you can get by with just one song? This tendency has a synergistic relationship with the fact that it is often easier to just use a commercial studio recording of a song that “works” for the event. With the prevalence of this practice, one or two songs alone will become best known at the expense of variety in the total repertoire.

Songs sung by women dominate this realm of music making. This may be an indication of the greater involvement by women in traditional tasks and rituals, and perhaps a greater tendency for Punjab’s women to act as custodians of these older ways. In the coming years, developments in the roles of women in Punjabi society should have a profound effect on amateur folk music.

Writing in this area is most heavily represented by song text anthologies. These range all the way from simple chapbooks sold at newsstands to annotated volumes which contain commentary on the significance of the texts. First and foremost are the many volumes by Nahar Singh (1998) on the songs of the Malwa region, a project which he began in the mid-1970s and which has covered the gamut of amateur folk song types. Also notable is N. Kaur’s three volume *Bol Punjabianh de* (1999) which is an annotated collection of women’s songs of the East Punjab. For the West Punjab, the most substantial publications are collections of the *dhola* song form, including Harjit Singh’s pre-Partition work *Nain Jhanan* (1942) and later anthologies by Pakistani authors Asad (1989), Sharib (1985), and I’jaz (1978). Though song text anthologies do comprise the vast majority of writing on Punjabi music, much work can still be done. With the exception of the works mentioned, many of the particular regions within the Punjab have not received such thorough examination.<sup>10</sup>

Also rare in the literature on amateur folk song is any discussion of the *sound* of this music. We have already noted the tendency for Punjabi scholars to treat vernacular music as “folk literature.” Furthermore, the task of working with the sound aspect of music requires much more extensive fieldwork, more sophisticated equipment (i.e. recording equipment), and very different perceptual and analytical skills from working with text. In many cases the study of musical sound requires the researcher to learn to perform himself, since musical proficiency is not automatically acquired as one’s native language. Those who do perform the music—the vernacular musicians themselves—are rarely scholars, and other trained musicians (i.e. in classical traditions) are not

inclined to address *this* music. In the case of the latter type of scholar, Gill (1989) has furnished a small volume containing the notation of the tunes of many of the most common folk song forms, and some bits of notation exist here and there (e.g. Madan 1986, Paintal 1988), but no comprehensive analysis has been attempted. Though aspects of Punjab's musical language appear to be unique, we are without any real sense of how it relates to other systems of North India beyond what we imagine from overly general, dominant-discourse labels like "Rag Bhairavi." There is much to learn; for example, a preliminary study by this author of the tuning of the double fipple-flute, *algoza* and the one-stringed lute, *tumbi*, seemed to indicate that the intonation of pitches in the scale is distinctly different from the mainstream North Indian system. In the absence of reference material, the best service at this point may be to record this music for posterity until someone comes along who will work with it.

**II.2. Professional Folk Music.** This category includes the music of professional, and usually *hereditary*, musicians of long standing traditions. While the common audience enjoys this music freely, it is only the few, those specially trained or those who have inherited a niche, who possess the skills or the "rights" to perform it. Professional folk music is performed both as entertainment and as necessary for certain social functions and rituals. Most of the traditional repertoire for the native Punjabi instruments falls under this category.

Some distinct professional folk musician types include—

- *Mirasi*: Historically the largest class of performers in Punjab, which includes many types of musicians. Some also act as praise-singers or genealogists. The bulk are Muslims who have concentrated in Pakistan since Partition.
- *Dhadhi*: Balladeers that perform as a trio of singers, with one player of *sarangi* (bowed lute) and two players of *dhadh* (small hourglass drum). Sufi *Dhadhis* sing romantic tales and poetry, while Sikh *Dhadhis* recount the deeds of heroes and martyrs of the Sikh tradition. Although historically they may have represented a division of the *Mirasi*, now they are a distinct group marked by their performance style and repertoire.
- *Bazigar*: Performance artists traditionally associated with acrobatics and other feats of skill, but who include various kinds of music in their repertoire. In the East Punjab they now perform some of the musical work once performed by *Mirasis*.
- *Dholi* (incl. *Bhrain*, *Jogi*, *Mirasi*, *Bazigar*): An occupational category including professional players of *dhol* (barrel drum) that cuts across a few ethnic communities. *Bhrain*, the traditional village drummers, are primarily found in Pakistan. *Dholis* in India receive much of their income from accompanying dance performances.

- Various specialists on particular instruments: E.G. *algoza*, *tumbi*, *bin* (“snakecharmer’s” reed pipe), *vanjali* (flute), etc. Players of such instruments do not necessarily belong to any particular community. Practice of these traditions varies from a more formal student-teacher discipleship, to a casual use of the instruments by near-amateurs.

Being a *professional* art, that is, one whose practitioners generally expect compensation, this music requires patronage in order to thrive. In the past, such musicians received support from noble persons or high-status families in the case of entertainment, and from the community in the case of ritual functions. For example, Mirasis could earn a living both from singing ballads in a royal court and from eulogizing the family line of an individual who had died. In the case of performers like the Bazigar, their success was dependent on a town’s need for fresh entertainment. Nowadays noble patronage is absent. In a cash economy, patronage by the community at large has greatly decreased not only because the rituals are less practiced but also because it is often cheaper to buy a recording for the event. Newer forms of entertainment media have made the traditional routines passé. And finally, professional activity by individuals from non-traditional music backgrounds has threatened the monopoly once guaranteed to the hereditary groups. This leaves only the erratic patronage of the government, which can at best accommodate only a few of the musicians. Therefore we see a great decline in the practice of older professional folk music traditions as they cease to be profitable. A few types of musicians in this style are still indispensable, however. The most notable example is that of the *dholis*, who find work accompanying state- and university-sponsored dance performances.

The practice of professional folk music is dominated by men, according to the traditional value that discourages women from performing professionally. Exceptions to this gender rule include the paid services at births and weddings by women of the Mirasi and Bazigar communities. The vast majority of individuals from families once associated with performing music now get most of their living from performing unskilled labor.

Detailed study of the art of any of these musicians is lacking, such that even the general picture that we have, e.g. of what communities perform what music, is poor. Most of the descriptions of these musicians that we find here and there merely reiterate the common and not necessarily accurate perceptions of outsiders. Pande’s (1999) numerous but brief interview vignettes skim the surface of much needed ethnography of these professional artists. Nijhawan’s (2003) study of Sikh and Sufi *dhadhi* musicians is the first of its kind. Almost completely absent in the literature is any specific description of professional folk musicians’ repertoire, or of the manner by which they learn their art. And while basic descriptions of instruments exist (e.g. Narula 1989), their manner of playing is usually not explained. This author’s own research (Schreffler 2002) has documented and analyzed the repertoire of the *dhol*, and a current endeavor



aims to provide details on the *dhol*-playing communities, especially the Bazigars.

**II.3. Commercial “Folk” Music.** This can be used to label a genre composed of commercially oriented singers who sing from the traditional “folk” repertoire, or at least in a *folksy* style, solely for the purpose of entertainment. These singers are generally not of hereditary professional background, and thus they represent a group that is distinct from the professional folk musicians discussed above. In this music, regardless of the age of the text or melody being sung, they are usually set to a newly composed, fixed arrangement by a “music director.” These planned and polished arrangements are consumed via recordings and outdoor stage shows. The most common groupings are solo singers or male-female duos, which are accompanied by an eclectic array of native and modern instruments.

Popular music, that is, the type of vernacular music that is consumed mainly through mass media like radio and audio, has been recorded in the Punjab since the 1930s. While the earliest recordings were either film songs by the likes of Sehigal and Noor Jehan or occasional specimens by professional folk balladeers, by the 1960s these gave way to recordings of the more popular festive folk songs. Recordings by artists like Surinder Kaur and Prakash Kaur represent a transition, as they mainly performed traditional material, albeit polished for the recorded format. Another well-known pioneer in this genre, Asa Singh Mastana, was accompanied by music that much resembled the texture of film music through its inclusion of orchestral instruments like clarinet and violin. These were the beginnings of a commercial format for “folk” music. Many newly composed songs created in this period have since been circulated orally and thus become integrated into the amateur folk repertoire.

In its heyday of the 1970s to the early 1980s, commercial folk music entertained rural and working class audiences with material that ranged from the comedic to the bawdy. The newly written songs and innovative arrangements by composers like K. S. Narula and Charanjit Ahuja represent the roots of modern Punjabi pop music. They achieved this first by reflecting contemporary themes in the text while still keeping the Punjabi vocal style intact. Next they used carefully selected foreign instruments, as well as using native instruments in non-traditional ways, to create a lively accompaniment. Finally, they adapted the formal sensibility of the songs to fit the short popular song format. The result was a type of music that was accessible to a large part of the increasingly cosmopolitan Punjab population. Kuldeep Manak, one of the best-loved singers of the era, is still something of a hero for the upcoming generation of Punjabis living abroad.

An interesting phenomenon unique to this genre was the format of male-female duos, such as Mohammad Siddiq and Ranjit Kaur, K. Deep and Jagmohan Kaur, or Kartar Ramla and Usha Kiran. Aside from in films, we do not see duo singing such as this anywhere else in Punjabi music. Perhaps the uncommon circumstance is what inclined these acts towards a sort of risqué

banter, which was reminiscent of certain wedding songs of jousting between the bride and groom's relatives. The era of this subgenre effectively ended with the assassination in 1988 of the duo of Amar Singh Chamkila and Amarjot, whose frank lyrics and unconventional personal relationship had drawn anger during that tense period in Punjab. There have been a few attempts to revive this style as of late, but in the context of the present music industry these artists appear to be unable to capture the intensity of past artists. For the most part, the music of commercial folk singers is nowadays looked upon nostalgically as "oldies" or condescendingly as "truck driver music."

No study has been done on any aspect of commercial folk music.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, much could be learned from a close analysis of this transitional phase of the Indian Punjab's culture as seen through the lens of music. At this historical turning point we can see such phenomena as the shift from direct to mass-mediated transmission for the consumption of music, the shift from hereditary musician castes to lay musicians entering the profession of music, and the shift in creation by the performers themselves to creation by music directors. Sources such as the radio station AIR Jalandhar and the many still-living artists make for accessible research for someone willing to tell the story of Punjabi popular music.

**II.4. Pop Music.** Following convention I label as "pop" music the newer products of Punjab's well-developed popular music industry. This music is distinguished from commercial folk music in that it eschews the older traditional elements associated with Punjabi music and relies more on mass production and distribution. While the accompaniment to this music often shows the influence of pop music from abroad, the songs themselves are usually recognizably Punjabi in their form and texts. Pop music is created to entertain (if not advertise), and it serves the financial interests of a third party. The performers are of non-traditional backgrounds, and their images are frequently manipulated by the media in the manner of celebrities.

By the early 1980s, the music industry of Punjab was showing the influence of Western dance club music. For example, Gurdas Mann's "Dil da mamla hai," while fairly traditional in terms of timbre, featured a quick, assertive rhythm reminiscent of disco. This initially inspired the label "disco *bhangra*," which was later shortened to just "*bhangra*," however inaccurate that term may be. At the same time, a trend in recorded music was developing whose presentation seemed to owe more to the influence of the light film *ghazal* and soft Western pop, rather than the hard-hitting, rustic style of the commercial folk singers. Nevertheless, such music has more or less retained the melodic shape and phrasing of Punjabi song. At minimum it includes Punjabi language, and in this sense it will be included with other "Punjabi" music. Today pop music constitutes the bulk of the recorded music that is danced to at urban Punjabi weddings in India, if not in Pakistan as well.

Roughly two spheres of Punjabi pop music can be distinguished nowadays. The first, by performers like Babbu Mann, Hans Raj Hans, and the late Surjit

Bindrakhia, caters mainly to a Punjabi audience. Its lyrics are banal at times, but nonetheless the songs often conform to well-worn Punjabi verse forms and also may address local social themes or reference the Punjabi love epics. The second sphere, which emerged in the mid-1990s when it was best represented by the likes of Daler Mehndi, is Punjabi-derived pop music of the most generic, mass-appeal variety, which is consumed widely in North India. Its language is a simple Punjabi (or even Hindi) that other Indians can understand, and the lyrics stay away from regional themes. The incessant rhythms in this music are produced with machine-like rigidity, appropriate to club-style dancing. Music of this second type functions as a double-edged sword: in quality it does not represent the best of what Punjab has to offer, but it may be some small source of pride in that it rivals film music as a major mode of pop music South Asia.<sup>12</sup>

Although, as with all arts, there are better and worse quality examples of this music, Punjabi pop music is too often lumped together by older generations as a form of “bastardization.” It is unfair to expect tastes to always remain the same, or to expect older styles to fit all the present uses and contexts for music. Moreover, it is unfair to label all forms of modernisation or all forces of change as “Western,” and then, in turn, to condemn these changes on that basis. The view that tradition is being corrupted also neglects to consider the aspect of innovation that goes along with the creation of a new genre. So instead of judging the music by the standards of the past, we should endeavor to understand its significance to its current audience. For example, several writers have demonstrated that pop music in the diaspora serves to help resolve behavioral and identity-related conflicts which confront young Punjabis by providing both a connection to past traditions, while accommodating incorporation into the local youth scene (e.g. Baumann 1990, Maira 1999, Sharma et. al. 1996). A similar phenomenon might be argued to exist in Punjab itself.

Nevertheless, while disagreeing with those who would say that pop music is inherently without value, and while recognizing the inevitability of change, we can still give recognition to the fact that that certain phenomena occurring within the sphere of pop music are significantly affecting Punjabi music and perhaps even Punjabi culture in general. Nor can we deny that the changes created by these phenomena are found disturbing by many people who are emotionally attached to traditions of the region with which they are most familiar. First to note is that the changes in Punjabi music, especially those that entail the adoption of elements considered foreign or global, are generally occurring faster than they would have in the past.

Secondly, Punjabi pop music is so ubiquitous nowadays that all other music seems marginalized by comparison. It is advertised in the form of highly produced music videos that receive constant play on television. Indeed, most Punjabi-oriented TV channels, such as *Balle Balle* and *ETC Punjabi*, are completely or partially devoted to such material. On any given day only a small number of music videos (or edited versions which serve as briefer advertisements) are repeated each hour or half-hour, drilling their refrains into

the minds of the viewers. Because of the non-specific nature of the lyrics to many Punjabi pop songs; the images that accompany the music in these videos are free to be highly imaginative, although not necessarily original. As such it is common for the images to be of a nationalistic nature, in the sense that elements that are supposed to distinctly characterize Punjabi life are prominently displayed. These may be aspects of “folk” life, such as *phulkari*, buffaloes, or hot melted *ghio*. The images may be equally “modern,” seeming to show how cosmopolitan the Punjabis are through their familiarity with global trends and fashions. Given the power of television and other mass media to construct an “imagined community,” this focus on identity, using music as the vehicle, is especially noteworthy. The unfortunate effect is that of a 24-hour per day advertisement for a very narrow image of “Punjabi culture.”

A third phenomenon at work in the current popular music industry is that of blind imitation. This should be no surprise, as capitalism so often inspires the creation of multiple replicas of whatever seems to be selling well. Here however, there are at least two levels of imitation. In the later stages of the process, imitation entails simply copying elements from another song in the same musical sphere. For example, there has been a trend recently in Punjabi pop music to overuse the “vocoder” effect in electronically altering vocal performances. This leads to a decrease in variety on the surface, which may inspire the familiar sentiment, “Everything sounds the same.”<sup>13</sup>

At an earlier stage, however, the process of imitation takes the form of pop music striving to replicate or incorporate products from outside the pop music sphere. As before, these outside products most often come from the Punjabi “folk” culture or from global sources. Regardless of whether the pop music intends to accurately represent these sources, the nature of mass media is such that truth and fiction become hard to separate; representations imply by their very nature that they stand for something in actual existence.<sup>14</sup> The popular music industry’s crude imitations of both Western genres and Punjab’s own rural folk life, in which the bits which are not known or understood are fabricated, contribute to the construction of a community (virtual or otherwise) that is dissonant with the type of community regularly experienced by most Punjabis.

Though newspapers frequently mention pop singers— usually either as individuals “corrupting tradition” or as celebrities appearing at social functions— scholarship is lacking on these musicians. One scholar, Joyce Hughes, is currently in India studying the Punjabi pop music phenomenon.<sup>15</sup> Hopefully more scholars will treat pop music less dismissively and more seriously as we begin to realize the serious effects this mode of production is having on the face of Punjabi music.

**II.5. Dance.** The dance genres of Punjab are of the communal, group type, which are performed for celebration, entertainment, or the purpose of attaining trance. The usual paradigm involves a ring of dancers who move counterclockwise to the beat of the drum *dhol*. The main exception to this is

*giddha*, which is not a dance in the customary sense, but which is usually categorized as one.

Before extensive colonization of the western areas and long-range communications building in Punjab, a number of dance varieties were practiced. In the western *bar* areas and towards the South, the graceful *jhummar* and *sammi* were the preeminent dances when celebrating weddings, festivals, and other happy occasions. Towards the Pathan areas of the Northwest, the quick stepping *luddi* dance and stick dances such as *dandas* were popular. The Vaisakhi fair was the occasion for the *bhangra* in the central Punjab. Malwa had its *giddha*, which is a type of folk poetry-performance session. And Sufis at shrines everywhere paid homage to their *pir* through the ecstatic dance-ritual of *dhamal*. The displacement of the Partition weakened the practice of these dances as local customs, and other factors have subsequently contributed to their decline. The development in West Punjab was such that dances other than *dhamal* tend to be held in low regard. And on the eastern side, the overwhelming prominence of *bhangra* has had a marginalising effect on other dances.

The latter phenomenon may seem ironic, since historically the practice of *bhangra* dance itself was rather marginal. However, the modern style of staged dance that is called *bhangra*, while sharing the same name, contains very few of the dance actions believed to have been performed in the communal *bhangra*. Rather, modern *bhangra* was consciously constructed by request of the Maharaja of Patiala in 1953, to include brief displays of actions culled from several Punjabi dances. Up through the 1970s performance artists gradually added new dance steps and rhythm variants, to shape what is now a sort of staged enactment of Punjabi national identity. This modern *bhangra* has been reified in films and canonized in the colleges of Punjab, where *bhangra* dance groups function much like sports teams.

*Giddha* is in a unique position since, unlike most other dances, its practice was not significantly disrupted by the Partition, and it still enjoys a place in rural events much like it did in the past. However, the process of nationalization that happened in the modern *bhangra* phenomenon has also affected women's *giddha*. Ignoring the fact that the historic regions of *bhangra* and *giddha* did not overlap, as well as ignoring the existence of what may be called men's *giddha*, national programs in India have set up Bhangra as *the* "men's" dance and *giddha* as *the* "women's" dance of the Punjabi people.

In the past fifteen years there have been attempts to stage the other regionally-specific dances in the manner of modern *bhangra*, and once again transformation and preservation occupy a two way street. Performances of *jhummar*, for example, have been controversial, drawing accusations of their being "inauthentic," "incorrect," or "impure"; certainly their quality has been erratic. Moreover, no matter how "authentically" a dance is presented; the staging of these dances has the inevitable consequence of artificially fixing their forms. Practitioners are divided in their attitude towards this phenomenon, since some would say it is better to artificially preserve something than to "lose" it

completely. In any case, the endeavor to promote the marginalised Punjabi dances so far has not been very effective; the public does not seem to be much more aware of the dances. At the time of writing, dance steps from *jhummar* seem to be all the rage in Punjabi pop music videos.<sup>16</sup> These steps, which hardly represent the full variety of the different regional forms of *jhummar*, are not only reaching the widest audience so far, they are also in turn forming the basis for a sort of “generic” *jhummar* which we may see develop just as *bhangra* had before it.

Two books, one in English and one in Punjabi, have made valuable contributions to Punjabi dance research. Dhillon’s *Folk Dances of Punjab* (1998) and Nahar Singh’s *Punjabi Lok-Nach* (1988) both nicely survey the dance traditions, with the first emphasizing mapping and history, and the second commenting on its cultural significance. With these we have a firm foundation for the next step which is greater depth of research on each individual genre, for example, Wolf’s (forthcoming) recent investigation of *dhamal* in Lahore. The present author’s own current project involves documenting the extant traditions of *jhummar* and *sammi* dance.

To conclude, studies of Punjabi vernacular music are generally under represented in fields such as Musicology and Ethnomusicology. The field is wide open for any serious work that will address Punjabi music in terms of its sound and technique, or the classes of performers and their social backgrounds, or its cultural meaning and effect in any respect. My hope in attempting to circumscribe and categorize the topic of Punjabi vernacular music has been to facilitate a discourse for future studies that can avoid facile observations on the nostalgia-laden theme of “folk music” and can instead hone our perceptions of what we observe when we encounter this music.

---

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> While this article treats many issues that are common to the historic Punjab region in general, it speaks with less experience towards the West Punjab and rather focuses on the East.

<sup>2</sup> For a list of some of these early references, see Randhava and Satiarhi 1960, 146-148.

<sup>3</sup> See *ibid.*, 148.

<sup>4</sup> We can also see this emphasis in the custom of housing Punjab’s vernacular music scholars not in Music departments, but rather Punjabi Language departments of universities.

<sup>5</sup> For glimpses into the context of *gurmat sangit*, volumes of collected papers are useful, such as Gurnam Singh (1995) and *Punjab Vich Sangit, Nat, ate Chitar Kala* (1989).

<sup>6</sup> For details on the *kirtan* genre, see Vidiarhi (1992).

<sup>7</sup>But see the fuller treatment in Banerji and Baumann (1990).

<sup>8</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Females from the bard and barber communities respectively.

<sup>10</sup> Examples of text anthologies of other regions are Karamjit Singh's (1985) work on the Doaba and Seva Singh's (1979-80) collection of Punjabi songs from Jammu-Kashmir.

<sup>11</sup> Save for a brief report on the cassette industry in Manuel (1993).

<sup>12</sup> Note the prominence of Punjabi pop music videos on India's MTV.

<sup>13</sup> Now that Punjabis outside of Punjab (e.g. in Europe, beginning a few years back) are able to receive Punjabi channels like *ETC Punjabi* via satellite dish, the potential for mass spread of such replicas is even greater.

<sup>14</sup> This assumption differentiates representation from what Baudrillard calls *simulation*—" [T]he generation by models of a real without origin or reality; a hyperreal" ("Simulacra and Simulations," in *Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster, Stanford University Press, 1998, 166).

<sup>15</sup> See preliminary article, Manuel and Hughes (forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps inspired by a scene in the Punjabi film *Ji Aayan Nun* (Manmohan Singh, dir., 2002).

### Selected Bibliography

- Asad, Iqbal, ed. (1989) *Ganji Bar de Dhole* ['Dhola Songs of the Ganji Bar Area'; Punjabi (Shahmukhi)], Lahore: Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board.
- Aulakh, Kulwant Singh. (1985) *Majhe de Lok Git* ['Folk Songs of Majha Region'; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Amritsar: Literature House.
- Banerji, S.. (1988) 'Ghazals to Bhangra in Great Britain,' *Popular Music* 7:2
- Banerji, Sabita, and Gerd Baumann. (1990) 'Bhangra 1984-8, in Paul Oliver (ed) *Black Music in Britain: Essays on the Afro-Asian Contribution to Popular Music*, Milton Keynes; Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Baumann, Gerd. (1990) 'The Re-invention of Bhangra: Social Change and Aesthetic Shifts in a Punjabi Music in Britain,' *The World of Music*, 32 (2).
- Daler, Avtar Singh. (1954) *Punjabi Lok-Git (Banatar te Vikas)* ['Punjabi Folk-Song (Structure and Development)'; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Jalandhar: New Book Company.
- Dhillon, Iqbal Singh. (1998) *Folk Dances of Punjab*, Delhi: National Books.
- Gian Singh. (1996 [1961]) *Gurbani Sangit* (First Part), Amritsar: Shromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee.
- Gill, Gurpratap Singh. (1989) *Punjab dian Lok Dhunan* ['Folk Tunes of Punjab'; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Patiala: Punjabi University.
- Gurnam Singh, ed. (1995) *Gurmati Sangit: Vibhinn Paripekh* ['Gurmat Sangeet: Various Perspectives'; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Patiala: Punjabi University.
- Harjit Singh. (1942) *Nain Jhanan* ['The River Chenab'; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Ropar: Harjit Singh.

- 
- Harmindar Singh. (c.1988) *Gurmati Sangit* (First Part), Ludhiana: Gurdwara Guru Nanak Satsang Sabha.
- I'jaz, A. D., ed. (1978) *Canje Chatte: Bar ke Dhole* [“Honeycomb-style Plaits”: Dholā Songs of the Bar Region’; Urdu], Islamabad: Lok Virse ka Qaumi Idarah.
- Karamjit Singh. (1985) *Dhart Duabe di* [‘The Land of the Doaba Region’; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Amritsar: Hall Bazar.
- Kohli, Surindar Singh. (1944) *Punjab de Git* [‘Songs of Punjab’; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Ludhiana: Lahore Book Shop.
- Madan, Panna Lal. (1986) *Punjab vic Sangit Kala da Nikas te Vikas* [‘Emergence and Development of the Musical Art in Punjab’; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Patiala: Punjabi University.
- Maira, Sunaina. (1999) ‘Identity Dub: The Paradoxes of an Indian American Subculture (New York Mix),’ *Cultural Anthropology*, 14 (1).
- Manuel, Peter. (1993) *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Manuel, Peter and Joyce Hughes. (Forthcoming) ‘Punjab’ in *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World, vol. 5, Oceania and Asia*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Middlebrook, Joyce. (2000) ‘Punjab’ in Allison Arnold (ed) *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, vol. 5, South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, New York; London: Garland.
- N. Kaur. (1999) *Bol Panjbanh de* [‘Punjabi Women’s Verses’; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], three volumes, Patiala: Punjabi University.
- Nahar Singh. (1985) *Malve de Tappe* [‘Short Verses of the Malwa Region’; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Chandigarh: Akal Sahit Prakashan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1988) *Punjabi Lok-Nac: Sabhiacarak Bhumika te Sarthakta* [‘Punjabi Folk Dance: Cultural Introduction and Significance’; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Sarhind: Lokgit Prakashan.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1998) *Malve de Lokgit* [‘Folksongs of Malwa’; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], ten volumes, Patiala: Punjabi University.
- Narula, Anil. (1989) *Punjab de Lok Saz* [‘Folk Instruments of Punjab’; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Patiala: Punjabi University.
- Nayyar, Adam. (2000) ‘Punjab’ in Allison Arnold (ed) *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music, vol. 5, South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, New York; London: Garland.
- Nijhawan, Michael. (2003) ‘Shared Melodies, Partitioned Repertoires: An Ethnography of Sikh and Sufi *Dhadi* Performance in Contemporary Punjab,’ *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, 10 (1&2).
- Paintal, Gita. (1988) *Punjab ki Sangit Parampara* [‘The Music Tradition of Punjab’; Hindi], New Delhi: Radha Publications.
- Pande, Alka. (1999) *Folk Music & Musical Instruments of Punjab*, Middletown, NJ: Grantha Corporation.



- 
- Randhava, Mahindar Singh and Devindar Satiarhi. (2000 [1960]) *Punjabi Lok Git* Punjabi (Gurmukhi), New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Rose, H. A. ed. (1990 [1883]) *A Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab and North West Frontier Province*, Vol. 1, 2, 3, Patiala: Language Dept. Punjab.
- Schreffler, Gibb. (2002) 'Out of the *Dhol* Drums: The Rhythmic "System" of Punjabi Bhangra,' Master's thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (Forthcoming) 'From "Jolly Ruckus" to "Being Punjabi": Bhangra as Word, Genre, Identity' in Timothy J. Cooley and Jon Cruz (eds) *Global Soundings*.
- Seva Singh. (1979-80) *Jammu-Kashmir de Punjabi Lok-git* ['Punjabi Folksongs of Jammu and Kashmir'; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Jammu: Jammu-Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture, and Languages.
- Shamsher, Kartar Singh. (1961) *Nili te Ravi* [Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Ludhiana: Punjabi Sahitt Akademi.
- Sharib, Professor, ed. (1985) *Bar de Dhole* ['Dhola Songs of the Bar Region'; Punjabi (Shahmukhi)], Lahore: Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board.
- Sharma, Sanjay, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma, ed. (1996) *Dis-orienting Rhythms: The Politics of the New Asian Dance Music*, London; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books.
- Tara Singh. (1991) *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Rag Ratnavali* ['Anthology of Rag-s in the Guru Granth Sahib'; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Patiala: Punjabi University.
- Thuhi, Hardial. (2002) *Tumbe nal Jori Vajdi: Ravaiti Punjabi Lok Gaiki* ['Algoza Plays with the Tumba: Traditional Punjabi Folk Singing'; Punjabi Vidiarhi, Devindar Singh. (1992) *Kirtan: Sandarabh ate Sarup* ['Kirtan: Context and Form'; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Patiala: Punjabi University.
- Wolf, Richard K. (Forthcoming) 'The Poetics of "Sufi" Practice: Drumming, Dancing, and Complex Agency at Madho Lal Hussain (And Beyond).'
- No Author. (1989) *Punjab Vich Sangit, Nat, ate Chitar Kala* ['Music, Theatre, and Visual Art in Punjab'; Punjabi (Gurmukhi)], Patiala: Punjabi University.

