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Zara Pael, left, and Sonal Shah strike a pose while performing Bhangra during India Nite, an annual event held at the University of Missouri.



MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/AP PHOTO/COLUMBIA DAILY TRIBUNE

Return to Bhangra

By Sunita Dhurandhar

From dance clubs to gym clubs, young South Asian women reclaim a dance never meant for them.

Growing up in the mostly white suburb of Walnut Creek, California, Sonia Dass never imagined that she could become a bhangra dance performer. "I was very shy growing up," she says. "I could never have pictured myself on stage dancing in front of all these people." Neither did she feel much connection to her South Asian cultural background. Sonia's father is from a small village in Punjab, India, and her mother grew up in a Punjabi diasporic community in the Fiji Islands. Dancing was somewhat stigmatized in Sonia's family, with her mother not allowed to dance in her youth and Sonia herself discouraged from dancing except with close family. When she joined an all-female bhangra team as a student at University of California-Davis, it gave her cultural pride and con-



VIKRAM JANK/NIRALI MAGAZINE

Students in Sarina Jain's Masala Bhangra Fitness class in New York City. Bhangra workouts are increasingly popular at gyms.

entirely composed of men and women of South Asian origin, can be all-female, all-male, or coed.

Women have created the bhangra fitness workout, another popular innovation. Sarina Jain, who seeks to be known as the "Indian Jane Fonda," developed the Masala Bhangra Workout. Jain, whose family is from Jaipur, India, was born and raised in Orange County, California. She combined her passions for bhangra and fitness by creating a cardiovascular workout based on moves she adapted from bhangra parties. She teaches at health

clubs and has created a series of videos. While her classes are more popular with non-South Asians, many young South Asian women cite her videos as helping them to learn the dance.

The Lure of Tradition

Despite the popularity of bhangra with young women, bhangra's roots as a traditionally male dance affect women's experience of the dance. Jain suggests that women are drawn to the dance because the traditionally male movements make women feel strong. Bhangra is "very much a man's