

The New York Times

January 13, 2012

Urban Athlete

A Wedding Dance That's Also a Workout



VICTOR BLUE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Shawn Kakar dancing at the Basement Bhangra event at S.O.B.'s. Several gyms in New York offer bhangra classes.

By SHIVANI VORA

ATENDING Indian weddings and ending up the night sweaty and tired from hours of bhangra dancing have been regular parts of my weekend repertory since I was a child. The catchy music can entice even the most die-hard wallflower to move. But though my heart beats fast, and my legs end up sore, I've never thought of bhangra as a workout.

Apparently I'm behind the times. Dance studios, gyms and clubs in New York City and beyond focus on the fitness aspects of bhangra, a centuries-old folk dance from northern India that farmers still perform to celebrate the harvest.

Today bhangra is also an Indian wedding staple only vaguely resembling its humble roots; it has morphed into a series of high-energy moves that test the stamina of any regular gymgoer (and are a feature of the dancing in Bollywood movies). The dancing is usually punctuated with joyous shouts of "balle balle," the Hindi version of "woo-hoo."

If you don't have an invitation to an Indian wedding, the best place to experience bhangra in a party atmosphere is at Basement Bhangra, a monthly event at S.O.B.'s in Lower Manhattan, where the dancing stretches until 3 in the

Where to 'Balle Balle'

Some places to get moving:

THE AILEY EXTENSION aileyextension.com.

BASEMENT BHANGRA djrekha.com.

CRUNCH crunch.com.

MASALA BHANGRA CLASSES masaladance.com.

NEW YORK SPORTS CLUB nysc.com.

Y.M.C.A. ymcany.org.

morning. It starts with a free lesson in the moves, like pushing the arms toward the ceiling in rapid succession or doing a squat four times on the beat while the arms are to the sides, and the elbows extended.

"Yes, it's a party," said Rekha Malhotra, better known as DJ Rekha, who created this event. "But from a fitness perspective, bhangra is an all-out sport and very much a cardio workout with all the jumping up and down and other moves that are involved."

Basement Bhangra can be quite intense. Enthusiastic dancers drip with sweat as they squat, jump and raise their arms.

New Yorkers who like the idea of bhangra but aren't into the late-night scene can try the Masala Bhangra

classes at the Ailey Extension, part of the Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation. The moves in these hourlong sessions aren't complicated, and even the most uncoordinated can follow along.

A move called the dhol beat, for example, involves pulling down the arms while stamping one foot. And in another move, the classic bhangra, participants move side to side while they kick their heels to their glutes as if they were doing a hamstring curl.

Sarina Jain is the creator of the Masala Bhangra workout. (She also teaches classes at Ailey, as well as at Crunch and New York Sports Club). She said she developed it as a way to celebrate her Indian culture and to honor her father, who died of cardiac arrest when he was 48. "I want these classes to be a way to help people live longer," she said.

Maria Zoccoli, 51, a Hoboken resident and a sales executive for a clothing manufacturer, became a regular at Ailey's bhangra classes after watching them for several months while waiting for her Zumba classes to begin. She finally decided to give one a try and was hooked.

"My arms have more definition, and my legs are much stronger," she said. "And the upbeat music and high-energy moves make for an exhilarating workout."