

Sarina Jain Brings on the Bhangra Indian dance isn't just for weddings anymore.

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By Lizzie Crocker

In a brightly lit studio tucked inside New York City's renowned Alvin Ailey dance center, dozens of women and men sashay from one corner of the room to another to the beat of Bollywood rhythms, throwing their heads back dramatically.

"Here we go, you're in my world now!" their teacher, Sarina Jain, shouts, skipping around the room. Her waist-length black hair swishes as she lifts her sculpted arms into the air, her curved hands twisting, snakelike, as she roars, "*Ho balle balle!*"

The others echo her call, which means "woo-hoo" in Punjabi, as they try to keep up. "Keep moving!" Jain encourages between songs. It's a mantra that Jain, creator of the Masala Bhangra aerobic workout, repeats every day. A fusion of the traditional Bhangra Indian folk dance and Bollywood-inspired choreography, Masala (which translates to "spicy") Bhangra boasts thousands of followers around the world, along with roughly 500 certified instructors, from Japan and the U.K. to Norway and Kuwait.



Dubbed the "Jane Fonda of India" by her students, over the past 12 years, she has released nine workout DVDs and launched her own line of saris. Deepak Chopra, who interviewed Jain on his YouTube channel, hailed her "gift for energizing people." And while she isn't the only fitness guru teaching Bollywood and Bhangra-inspired aerobics in the U.S., she was the first Indian instructor to bring the workout craze to the masses. Sarina Jain, known as the "Jane Fonda of India," leads a class.

"My Indian aunts and uncles didn't believe in me at first," says Jain, who started teaching aerobics when she was in high school. "They would say, 'We're so happy you've found this hobby, little Sarina, but please go get a job now. Please get married,?'" she says.

Now in her mid-30s, Jain is traveling to Bombay to host her first teacher training in the homeland of Bollywood and Bhangra. Jain hopes to make a very real impact on the health of the country, which counts heart disease as its leading cause of death. "Indians eat a lot of rich food and don't like spending an hour on the treadmill, but they love Bhangra and Bollywood music," says Anusha Sipahimalani, an aerobics instructor in Bombay who has signed up for Jain's training program.

Jain was raised in an Indian community in California's Orange County, and her father always emphasized the importance of weaving Indian culture into her Western life. "He's the sole reason why I started Masala Bhangra," she says of her dad, who was 47 when he died of a heart attack. "I thought, if Dad worked out a little bit more, his heart might have been stronger." She also wanted to inspire others in her community to be more active. "I felt like I had to get these people moving," Jain says.

With these goals in mind, she combined Bhangra and Bollywood dance moves into her 32-step, 500-calorie-burning aerobics workout. Since then, Jain—who does all her own publicity—has scored her own show on the Discovery Channel's Fit TV, introduced Masala Bhangra to Crunch gyms, created an official Masala Bhangra teacher-training manual, and filmed workout videos on Bollywood sets.

This global success has been met with backlash from Bhangra purists, who are turned off by her glitzy style. Protesters bashed her workout on bhangrateams forum.com. "They would write things like, 'We should slit her throat so she can't say *Balle Balle* anymore,'" she explains. Her detractors were mainly young college kids from all-male Bhangra competition teams in New York's Desi community, who blamed her for threatening their efforts to keep Punjabi culture alive in the U.S.—though Jain was motivated by the same goal. "I would never want to defame my culture. I'm too proud," she says.

Though Jain's workout is essentially an amped-up version of dancing at an Indian wedding, her aunts are holding out for the real thing. "In India, age is a stigma," she explains. "I love what I do and I'm very happy, but I'm also not married. If you're not married [in India], you're not considered successful."

She sometimes looks to Jane Fonda, her '80s fitness counterpart, for inspiration. "She revolutionized the aerobic world," Jain says. "I'm not making millions of dollars like she did, but I'm proud to be the pioneer of Indian dance in the American fitness industry."