

Health

'Slumdog Millionaire' starts U.S. fitness craze with bhangra classes

Thanks to 'Slumdog Millionaire,' bhangra classes centered on a traditional Indian dance are the new fitness craze.

By Amy B Wang

Columbia News Service

Updated: 03/24/2009 09:11:55 AM CDT

"Balle! Balle!" Sarina Jain shouted during a packed session at a Crunch Fitness gym in Manhattan on a recent Tuesday night, calling out the rough equivalent of "Whoop!" in the Punjabi language. Nearly 40 women and one man thrusted and stomped and jabbed the air in the exercise studio in sync to the hit Indian pop song "Jai Ho," which blasted from the speakers.

"Feel the beat of the drums!" Jain exclaimed through her headset. "Shoulders! Shoulders!" and then, "Turn those lightbulbs!" as the dancers bobbed their arms and twisted their hands in unison.

So exuberant was Jain's sweat-drenched class that the Crunch cleaning staff gathered to watch them through the studio windows.

You may remember "Jai Ho" from "Slumdog Millionaire." It's the film's high-energy train station dance sequence that enlivens the closing credits. The movie and the number have inspired a growing interest in bhangra, a traditional Indian dance common in Bollywood films. Bhangra classes are popping up across the U.S. after the film won eight Academy Awards, including best picture of 2008.

Jain, who teaches Masala Bhangra at several gyms in Manhattan, says some of her class sizes have doubled since the movie was released. She said participants in her 45-minute class burn nearly 500 calories.

"When people see that scene in the movie," Jain says, "they're, like, 'Honey, that's what we do in class! That's what we do every Tuesday!'"

Jain, who is Indian-American, decided 10 years ago to combine fitness instruction with her native culture by creating the Masala Bhangra workout. She has since trademarked the term and had her routine certified by the Aerobics and Fitness Association of America.

The "Jane Fonda of India," as Jain is known to some, has her own line of exercise videos and has appeared on Fit TV.

"The only reason I joined the gym was for this class," says Kristin Carey, who credits the bhangra classes at Crunch with everything from greater stamina on the dance floor to newly glowing skin. "I never worked out until now, but this just makes you want to move."

"For me, it's the music," says Carine Desir, who upgraded her Crunch gym membership so she could take Masala Bhangra. "You're feeling the drums. You let it lead you."

At Springstep, a dance and music studio in Medford, Mass., the bhangra class filled past capacity for the first time this year, according to programs manager Allie Fiske.



"Right now, everything related to India is on the top because of 'Slumdog Millionaire,'" says Mary Pirela, a fitness instructor in Minneapolis. Pirela has arranged for Jain, who has certified Masala Bhangra instructors from Maplewood, Minn., to Elk Grove, Calif., to give a master class in April and certify local instructors.

Pete McCall, an exercise physiologist with the American Council on Exercise, says bhangra's different jumps and side-to-side movements make it an effective and relatively low-impact form of training. He likens the cardiovascular benefits to running on a treadmill at a moderate pace, with a lower risk of repetitive strain injuries. "It's a great way to train the entire body at one time," he says.

Bhangra music and dance originate in Punjab, a diverse state in the northwest of India, below Kashmir, that was divided between India and Pakistan when the two countries were partitioned. Farmers there once celebrated harvests by dancing in the fields to the syncopated beats of a dhol drum and the repetitive plucking of the tumbi, a stringed instrument.

The distinctive sound has seeped into American popular music, especially hip-hop. Rapper Missy Elliott sampled bhangra beats in her song "Get Ur Freak On," as did Jay-Z in "Beware of the Boys." Jay-Z recorded a remix of the song with Indian musician Punjabi MC.

Renu Kansal, an Indian-American dance instructor in Denver, added three new bhangra classes to her roster last October. Colorado, she says, is "not exactly the teeming hotbed of the Indian community." But one class filled up so quickly she had to find a larger studio space. Kansal plans to start bhangra classes for children.

"People get the hang of the steps really easily," Kansal says. "You feel very quickly on that you're good at it."

There's no baseline fitness level required for bhangra, something she thinks will contribute to its appeal and staying power.

"I mean, gigantic, hairy Punjabi men do it," she says. "So basically, anyone can."

Amy B Wang is a master's candidate at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism and can be reached at abw2124@columbia.edu.

MORE LIFE & CULTURE HEADLINES

- 'Slumdog Millionaire' starts U.S. fitness craze with bhangra classes
- Home: Gardening fair
- My Pet World: Dog's paws smell downright tasty
- Reader alert: Let us know about your group garage or plant sale
- Tech Test Drive: Three recession-friendly products might appeal to penny-pinchers
- Affirming Life support group gives women with stage four cancers hope and help
- Family Outings: Nickelodeon Universe pleases both thrill-seeking kids, reluctant riders

Related Topic Pages

- Health Care
- Exercise and Fitness