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Hip & Healthy: Masala Bhangra, the Spiciest Workout in Town

By Melissa Davison



I'd walked by the formidable Alvin Ailey Dance Theater so many times before, always catching glimpses of beautiful dancers in tights and leotards, pliéing and twirling in unison. But tonight, I was going inside the building myself to take a Masala Bhangra class being taught by the famous Sarina Jain -- the Jane Fonda of India.

Masala Bhangra, a feisty spin on traditional Indian folk dance, was one of several classes open to the public through the Alvin Ailey Extension, and this one was clearly popular. The studio was large but, with about 40 women inside, packed to the brim.

Sarina flew through the door, running to the center of the room. She told us, totally conversationally, that she'd just gotten off a red-eye -- as if we were all her close girlfriends, not starstruck pupils -- and moved right into the class.

She explained first that Masala meant "spicy" and that Bhangra was a traditional Indian folk dance -- this class was a cross-cultural dance workout. Masala Bhangra is all about celebration, she explained, "like I am inviting you to my wedding -- but I am not getting married." She added smirkingly, as she walked to the stereo to turn on the music, "If you know anyone, tell my mother. She's getting desperate for me."

Soon Indian music filled the room with drumbeats and energy. We began our dance routine, galloping across the floor in all directions. "Lean back and call to your lover," yelled Sarina as we leaped forward with one arm outstretched. After each set of steps, we added on, incorporating classic moves like the "light bulb," in which you lift and lower your shoulders as you turn your forearm like you are screwing in a light bulb (sort of like the royal wave meets Bollywood) with your head bobbing. "No matter what, move your head," said Sarina, with new steps, turns and hip twists.

It's hard to truly describe how much fun I found this class. I loved not having to be perfect technically; I jumped left to right, kicked my legs, flared my arms, rushed backward and then sashayed forward. The routine was fairly easy to master, and no steps were too complicated.

At each pause, I found myself sweatier and sweatier, yet more and more energized. Sarina had a way of transferring her effervescence, so I never wanted to stop. While some people were huffing and puffing around me, everyone was smiling and excited to start all over again from the top, to let all their emotions out through the movement and music.

The soundtrack for our class was custom-made for Masala Bhangra, and occasionally we would hear prerecorded phrases from Sarina -- "Feel the drumbeat." As we got to the final steps in our routine, we had outlasted the music, so we were left dancing in silence. Occasionally, she mixed it up with other songs to keep things fresh. I was surprised when there were only a few minutes left in the class; it was like the club was closing too soon. Only my hunger reminded me that I had just finished a workout, not a night of dancing with friends.

Masala Bhangra is as much fun as it is a workout -- in fact, it's my favorite of all the dance workouts I've tried. You don't have to be a good dancer; you won't feel silly if you don't get every step down perfectly. Everyone is there to enjoy the experience, the energy of the movements and the enthusiasm of the great instructor.

Masala Bhangra is not new to the fitness class scene. In fact, it just celebrated its 11th anniversary, but it is still one of the most coveted cultural dance workouts in town. It's offered at Alvin Ailey twice a week for about \$16 a class. You can also take it with Sarina at the NYSC or Crunch gyms or with a master instructor any day of the week at various locations throughout the city. Dancer or not, I suggest you to try it. I, for one, can't think of a more enjoyable way to burn 500 calories.

