Hardeep Singh Sahota

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Hardeep Singh Sahota is a leading authority on Bhangra, and has been one of the prominent forces in the UK delivering high quality, world-class Bhangra workshops, lectures and seminars over the last two decades. As a secondary school teacher of Art, he understands the intrinsic link between engagement, education, entertainment and the empowering properties of celebrating Bhangra.

Hardeep has accomplished a Masters-by-Research (MA) degree exploring the history of Bhangra; and has authored the much-acclaimed book, Bhangra: Mystics, Music & Migration. It explores the origins of this folk song and dance from the Panjab in South Asia and its development into part of modern British culture in the hybrid soundscape of British Bhangra and beyond. This originated in academic research and the Heritage Lottery-funded *Bhangra Renaissance* project. Through ethnographic research, oral history interviews, performances, photography, story-telling and community activity it celebrates the past contribution of all those involved in Bhangra. This ground-breaking work provides an in-depth history of the spiritualism of performance and song, and an overview of the artists involved in influencing its development, as well as contemporaries leading the way of Bhangra’s renaissance amongst the South Asian diaspora in the UK and around the world.

Hardeep is an Affiliate Fellow at the University of Huddersfield, in recognition of his research and work with the local community.  He is also the creative director of VIRSA, an organisation that explores the history and heritage of Bhangra through creativity. He also founded, both the World Bhangra Council, a global organistation that brings together its member states to celebrate the art form of Bhangra and World Bhangra Day; an event in which like-minded Cultural Ambassadors from around the world take part in shared global performances.

His has currently developed the ‘Bhangra Lexicon’ project which has included an online resource, free for all to use as well as the first ever exhibition that explores Bhangra through light-photography. The year-long exhibition was hosted at Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP) the leading international centre for modern and contemporary art. The Bhangra Lexicon is the World's first 'visual dictionary' of Bhangra movements found within this beautiful art-form. This academic research project has explored, recorded and catalogued over 300 movements and gestures found within Bhangra and its associated sub-genres.

Sahota’s academic enquiry to date has examined ephemeral elements of Bhangra moves, the movements or ‘Mudravan’, from the traditional ‘Puratan’ moves and how they correlate with specific Dhol (drum) beats, to more contemporary ‘Samakali’ interpretations that have evolved over time. The project’s exploration of the relationship between movement and image to present a formal ‘repertoire’ of Bhangra steps also acts as an online resource for learners to inscribe into their practice.

The project also explores the relationship between movement and image to present a formal 'repertoire' of Bhangra steps and so creating a visual dictionary of Bhangra and more aptly, a Bhangra Lexicon. The open-ended investigation carried out, is presented though photography, film and video light-painting, exploring the ephemeral elements of Bhangra moves and pushing the boundaries of creativity.

The Bhangra Lexicon photographic exhibition grew out of Sahota’s research. He collaborated with photographer Tim Smith to create dynamic images that give physical, even sculptural, form to the fleeting nature of dance through the fascinating medium of light painting. Dancers performed key moves whilst holding coloured lights in semi-darkness, so that every nuance of their actions was traced using long exposure photography. Flowing movements translated into bright, almost calligraphic strokes, capturing the individual character of each dance style. For this series, Sahota extended his enquiry into other genres and disciplines, including Irish dancing and Breakdancing as well as Bhangra. The atmospheric, vibrant photographs were taken in the evening at locations across Yorkshire, including YSP’s Formal Garden.

In images made using light painting, the person performing the action usually remains anonymous in the shadows, with the only focus being on the light. However, Sahota was keen that the costumes and cultural identities of the participants played an equally important role, so they are also illuminated using targeted flash. He describes how the creative collaborations between himself, the photographer and dancers are empowering for the participants, through working together to enmesh different disciplines and increase understanding of each art-form.

While the phenomenon of Bhangra now has a global reach with varied audiences around the world, its history, scope and depth are still not fully appreciated and so cannot be celebrated as they deserve to be. Sahota’s work strives to honour and extol this rich narrative through embedded research, vibrant performance and the meaningful bringing together of performers and communities.

Currently, Hardeep is exploring Bhangra using a ‘motion-capture’ studio and using 3D specialist motion capture technology to record the movements of Bhangra. These will then inform his new series of 3D printed sculptures based on these movements.

He is a new member of the International Dance Council and is excited to create new collaborative work focused on ‘International Dance Day 2023’ with many different fellow practitioners dancing in unison around the world at the same time.

Bhangra Lexicon – Photographic Exhibition:

<https://ysp.org.uk/exhibitions/hardeep-sahota-bhangra-lexicon>

Bhangra Lexicon – Research and Visual Resource.

<https://www.virsa.info/bhangralexicon/>