

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The mission of the MIT Bhangra Club is to teach and perform the lively and acrobatic folk art form of Bhangra and increase awareness of the culture from which it originates. Our emphasis is on the interpretive and artistic elements of Bhangra. We are requesting Full ASA Recognition as an undergraduate (UA) student group

Bhangra and its sister dance Gidda are energetic folk dances originating in the state of Punjab, India. The dancing is accompanied by the singing of traditional "boliyan" (lyrical couplets) and the playing of the "dhol" (drum); both of which are also considered folk art forms.

Bhangra today is more relevant to student populations than ever before.

"In recent years, fueled by the restless children of Indian immigrants [abroad], bhangra has morphed into a club phenomenon. DeeJays have mixed its distinctive racing drumbeat with reggae, hip-hop and techno elements... As reggae gave black youth a connection to their roots in the African diaspora, bhangra links young, Westernized South Asians with their native land." - **The Washington Post, 1998**

At colleges all across the country, there has been a dramatic surge of interest in Bhangra, both to learn its traditional roots, as well as to contribute to its resurrection as a modern art form by fusing it with elements of the Western experience. An annual intercollegiate Bhangra fusion competition in DC packs a full house of 3,500+ college students with teams competing from all over the east coast. The aim of the Bhangra Club is to promote both the traditional and modern aspects of the Bhangra art form here at MIT.

The Punjab/Bhangra Club has actually existed informally at MIT for 10 years now. In that time, it has grown from a gathering of 6 individuals sharing their Punjabi culture with each other to a diverse organization with an active membership of about 40 people each term. In addition, we have a much larger group of semi-active members who choose to be involved only during our summer term classes and performances. A large majority of our membership is composed of MIT undergraduates and graduate students, but our free classes are also open to other members of the greater Boston community. Our active membership includes both people of South Asian and non-South Asian descent and is open to anyone interested in attending our classes.

For new and returning members, we hold regular open dance classes every week during the term. These classes are held at least one night a week, and often twice a week. Attendance has been as high as 60 individuals at some classes this fall. We typically have around 5 experienced dancers teaching basic and more advanced steps and sequences. Classes also include Punjabi language and cultural lessons, to set the context for the dance and help students appreciate the choreography from an artistic viewpoint.

But these classes represent only one facet of our activities. Our accomplishments over the last 4 years are quite impressive for an unofficial club. In 1998 and 1999, we put together teams that auditioned for and were accepted to a national level Bhangra dance competition in DC. We created innovative choreographies and organized funding for the teams to compete at George Washington University's Bhangra Blowout, returning with a 2nd place finish in the 1998 competition. For the past 4 years, we have also performed as the finale exhibition dance at the Bhangra Blast competition here in Boston. In January 2002, a team organized by MIT Bhangra won 3rd place in another large competition sponsored by University of Michigan.

Artistic innovation over the years has also been a key accomplishment for us. The MIT Bhangra Club was one of the earliest proponents of a traditional style of bhangra, and this has brought us an understanding of the rich culture surrounding bhangra, and a very unique performance style that was soon being imitated by many other bhangra organizations. Recently we have also experimented with new ways to mix our bhangra roots with our western experiences, and this has been reflected in several bold, modern choreographies. In the spring of 2000, we choreographed a very well-received bhangra/techno fusion piece. This past fall, we have also very successfully experimented with increasing the narrative element of the dance, to express the parallels between our lives and the stories of traditional Punjabi life expressed by the lyrics. Additionally, we are experimenting with writing our own lyrics in the traditional style, but about elements of our college experience.

Additionally, the MIT Bhangra Club has become well known among many organizations in the area, and we are continually invited to perform at various cultural and charity events in and around Boston. For these events, more experienced members of our group create and teach a choreography to interested students. In general, these performance opportunities are open to any interested members. We have had as many as 40 people on stage during a single performance. Our group has traditionally been invited every year to provide the finale performance for the India Association of Greater Boston's Indian Independence Day celebrations, which attract 5,000 spectators to the Hatch Shell every August. We also traditionally provide the finale performance in the MIT South Asian Culture Show at Kresge. The MIT Bhangra Club has even been featured on BNN TV's show "It's All About Arts" in August 2000 and 2001. Members of our organization gave interviews, showcased previously taped performances, and provided a live bhangra lesson to the host!

Excluding the competitions already mentioned above, some events we have performed at during the Fall 2001 semester include:

- "Spice of Life", a multi-cultural street festival in Somerville
- MIT Parents' Weekend luncheon featuring a showcase of all dance organizations on campus
- Benefit performance on behalf of the South Asia Center in Cambridge
- Performance for the Boston chapter of the Network of South Asian Professionals (NetSAP)

One of our most important points is the need for MIT Bhangra to be a unique student activity. In the early years of our informal existence, MIT Bhangra lived unofficially under the umbrellas of Sangam and SAAS. At the time, this seemed appropriate because the Club was a channel for a small group of Punjabi students to exercise aspects of their heritage. However, the membership has grown steadily larger and more diversified. Our growing reputation has brought many more performance opportunities, and our organizational goals have expanded accordingly. It is no longer feasible nor desirable for SAAS or Sangam to be our primary means of support.

Because of this, for the last 3-4 years, our former tacit arrangements with these groups have no longer existed, but the Bhangra Club has still flourished. All of the accomplishments enumerated above have been achieved by an independent MIT Bhangra Club because we were better able to focus on our goals of diversifying the organization, teaching Bhangra to students of all backgrounds and seeking out new performance opportunities. Equally important is that this has provided an opportunity for our own members to take up leadership roles. With all the privileges of official recognition, we could only get stronger.

Our group has grown to the point where we feel we would greatly benefit from the privileges of ASA membership. We would immediately benefit from the ability to reserve rooms in CAC facilities and main campus to enable us to schedule different workshops, classes, socials and other activities. Additionally, the ability to make formal funding requests and create an ASA bank account would be invaluable to our finances as we look ahead to funding new activities and competition teams and purchasing new costumes

and props. Another important goal is to continue to diversify our membership beyond the South Asian community and hence we would look forward to the opportunity to recruit new members from the ASA summer mailings and Activities Midway. Since an important aspect of our mission is to promote awareness of Bhangra, we would also benefit from the ability to request an Athena locker and bulletin board space.

Looking to the future, our major goal is to expand the breadth of our activities. ASA recognition would provide us with resources to help us expand with these key activities:

- Classes focused more on the understanding/creation of traditional “boliyan” songs
- Classes focused on learning traditional dhol (large South Asian drum)
- Workshops focused on techniques for choreography
- Bringing in dance experts and Bhangra music professionals for presentations/workshops. We already have several contacts for this and continue to expand our network within the Bhangra community.
- IAP mini-series of classes emphasizing each of the aspects of Bhangra mentioned above
- Funding and organization of teams for national and regional competitions
- Creating more awareness of Bhangra’s sister style Gidda, including separate classes devoted to this style
- Continued artistic innovation with fusion of Bhangra and western traditions
- Celebrating the traditional Vaisaki festival in a way that showcases different aspects of the culture
- More social and team-building activities such as study breaks, video nights of previous performances and potlucks
- Increased collaboration with Bhangra organizations at Harvard, BU, Northeastern, Tufts and other schools
- Recruiting more members of non-South Asian descent
- General meetings at the beginning of each term to provide a forum for all club members to give feedback on the club’s direction and suggestions for new activities

Another important point is the group’s viability. As an unofficial club, we have had steady growth for almost 10 years now. Furthermore, Bhangra has become a national phenomenon in the last several years, particularly (though not exclusively) among college age South Asian Americans. Major competitions, including those we have attended, have been featured in the Washington Post and the New York Times. Each year, larger and larger groups of incoming freshman have heard of Bhangra and come in extremely excited to start attending our classes. In short, our prospects for the future seem strong.

We are also a financially viable organization. Despite the cost of purchasing and maintaining the handcrafted costumes and props we use, and general organizational expenses, we have managed to keep our classes completely free of charge. Again, this is because we are fortunate in that our reputation in the area makes outside organizations that request us to perform willing to help defray these costs to the Club. And though our philosophy is to never charge for classes, for competitions involving travel, expenses are also partially defrayed by the dancers. Achieving ASA recognition could only strengthen our financial viability as it would new open doors allowing us to apply for various performance arts grants and student activities funding.

We believe that the MIT Bhangra Club would be a unique and worthy addition to the family of ASA recognized student activities. With the support of the ASA, we can build on our achievements of the past several years and continue to offer dance classes and performance opportunities to all interested MIT students. Strengthening our organization with ASA recognition will also allow us to make more progress in the teaching Punjabi language and culture, and focusing on the artistic aspects of this dance style.

MIT BHANGRA CLUB IN ACTION

Bhangra Fusion Competition, January 2002



South Asia Center Benefit, Fall 2001



MIT South Asian Cultural Show 1999



Bhangra Blowout Competition, 1998



Bhangra Blowout Competition, 1999



MIT I-Fair 1999



MIT I-Fair 1998



MIT I-Fair 1997



MIT I-Fair 1992

