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From Mumbai To Manhattan



by Martha Mendelsohn
Jewish Week Correspondent

It isn't as if my physical therapist didn't warn me. "You'll do hops and jumps," said Kunjal, who is of Indian descent, hinting that Bollywood-style dancing might undo some of the progress we'd been making with my arthritic right knee.

But after months of ProFitness, I was ready for fun fitness, and The Masala ("spicy") Bhangra Workout, a new cardio dance exercise class underway at the 92nd Street Y, was teaching the kind of high-energy, exuberant moves the reunited sweethearts break into at the end of "Slumdog Millionaire."

"It's about celebration! It's interactive! It isn't just aerobics!" Mickela Mallozzi, the instructor, reminds some 30 students in T-shirts and sweats at the Y's May Center for Health, Fitness and Sport on a frosty January

morning.

Nor is it like salsa or African dance. "I don't want to see any hips or chest," Mallozzi instructs. There are no pelvic gyrations. Movements may be "seductive and secretive," but they're mostly in the hands, head and shoulders.

With arms raised and wrists swiveling ("like unscrewing a light bulb," Mallozzi says), we slide and sashay to a tape of the fast-paced rhythms of the dhol drum, possibly the world's oldest instrument.



"Remember this is a men's dance! I don't want to see you trying to be graceful. No pointed toes!" Mallozzi tells the class of mostly women, as we progress to vigorous hops and jumps.

She uses the choreography of the Masala Bhangra Workout TM, a trademarked routine

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created by Sarina Jain (the "Indian Jane Fonda") based on folk dancing by men from India's Punjab region.

Men who are "embarrassed" in a regular aerobics class might feel "more comfortable" doing the more athletic bhangra, Mallozzi says.

"There's a step where you kick like a horse," says James Cobb, a sculptor, after the class, noting that bhangra has "a masculine beat but a feminine aura or atmosphere."

The energetic workout is said to burn more than 500 calories per session. Mallozzi herself lost 25 pounds doing bhangra.

"It's challenging," says Joyce Moses, who has worked with diverse groups as a social worker, and who's here, in part, because "I'm a great fan of Bollywood movies."

The Y's Masala Bhangra Workout uses traditional moves, Moses points out. Newer Bollywood films tend to incorporate hip-hop into bhangra routines.

"I didn't notice that in 'Slumdog Millionaire,'" I mention to Mallozzi.

"'Slumdog' isn't a real Bollywood movie," she says.

Still, my mind wanders to a certain railway station in Mumbai. Drums beat. The credits roll. Using elaborate hand gestures, crowds stomp and cheer. (After all, it's not everyday that a kid from the slums wins a million rupees and ends up with his beshert.)

In Mallozzi's class, we came together several times in a huddle, arms raised, wrists awl, shouting, "Balle, balle!" ("Hooray, Hooray!" the English subtitle would read in a Hindi-language movie.)

Could there be a move toward HinJus as part of a faith-based fitness movement rooted in Eastern religion? I found myself wondering. Are there HinJus among bhangra fans the same way there are JuBus among practitioners of yoga, another Indian import?

There's more interest in tapping into the overall culture, Mallozzi suspects. Many who take dance exercise classes "are proactively looking for something culturally different." (The occasional Indian who stumbles on her class is pleased to come across "something familiar.")

Joyce Glaberson, a retired teacher, who commutes to the Y from Brooklyn, is drawn to the culture as well as exercise aspects.

Her daughter has been backpacking in India. "I wanted to connect with her," said Glaberson, grabbing a late breakfast at the May Center's Café 92 after class. "Now I'm passionate about this. I've found my calling!"

Of course, there are HinJus (as well as U-Jews and Ju-Fis), Rodger Kamenetz, author of "The Jew in the Lotus," writes in answer to an e-mail query.

Ram Dass, aka Richard Alpert, "is probably the most famous Hin-Jew," Kamenetz opines. (I'd seen pictures of the blissed-out LSD sage striking a yoga pose. Did he try bhangra, too?)

On the lookout for "new angles on how to make and keep people fit," Mirabai Holland, director of fitness and wellness programs at the May Center, explored, then rejected, the idea of "Jewish Yoga."

"We avoid getting caught up in the rhetoric," Holland says. "We want everyone to feel welcome."

But "in trying to be on the cutting edge," she has followed the trend toward "fusion." Moving Free @ Fusion, which combines movement with meditation, Pilates Mat/Ballet Barre, Afro-Caribbean Dance and Zumba, a workout with Latin and international themes, are among the Y classes that combine different genres or ethnicities.

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There are HinJus — that is, people who embrace elements of both Hinduism and Judaism — Kunjal confirms as she massages my right knee. (She did warn me about the hops and jumps, didn't she?)

And by now, President Barack Obama had referred to Hindus right next to Jews in his inaugural address.

But you can't convert to Hinduism from any other religion, Kunjal says. You can marry a

Hindu and bring your children up Hindu, but to be a Hindu yourself you have to be born Hindu.

Will there be bhangra dancing at her upcoming wedding to her Indian-American doctor fiancé? I ask on my way to a therapy machine that would not be out of place in a dominatrix dungeon.

Yes, but at a wedding, there's real bhangra — with props. Some guy might stand in the middle of the circle with another guy standing on his shoulders doing things with sticks. A circle? At the Y, we didn't dance in a circle.

At weddings, she says, you do it in a circle. You dance around the people in the middle. A circle dance with two people improvising in the center? Sound familiar, anyone?

The Masala Bhangra Workout at 92nd Street Y
May Fitness Center and begins Jan. 27, 7:35-8:30 p.m. 18 sessions; begins Jan. 28, 9-9:55 a.m.,
18 sessions. Open to non-members.

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