

Working towards a Caste Free Society
Sikh Education Forum

The Growing Bhangra Music, Inter-Caste Marriages and Impact on the Youth

by

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Firstly, I'd like to thank the Sikh Education Forum for organising this pioneering conference to address Caste Based Discrimination. I believe this is the first such conference organised by the Sikh faithful in the UK to address such a vital issue. The Forum deserves to be congratulated.

I have been asked to address the topic of *the growing problem- vis-à-vis Bhangra music, Inter- caste marriages and the impact on young people*. This is a complex subject to address in a short space of time of 25 minutes. I am not an academic so I cannot divulge or call upon academic research in this area. When the topic refers to a *growing problem*, I understand this to mean a *growing problem* in the context of the Asian Diaspora but more specifically with respect to the Punjabi Diaspora in the UK.

You may ask why is Bhangra Music and Inter-Caste marriages lumped together in this way. What is the underlying reason for this. It will be pretty obvious to everyone that the underlying reason is Caste consciousness and how this is manifested in Bhangra music. I will deal firstly with Bhangra music and then go onto look at inter-caste marriages.

Do we find caste represented in Bhangra Music? To answer this question, let us firstly ask the question what is music. Here is the Oxford Dictionary definition of music:

That one of the finer arts which is concerned with the combination of sounds with a view to beauty of form and the expression of thought and feeling.

In this presentation, we are concerned with the expression of thought and feeling with respect to Bhangra music. A musical item usually combines a composer, the executor and add to it the lyric writer. Of course, any musical item can be composed by a single person acting as composer, executor and the lyricist.

Music: its power and usage.

Music has power to move emotions. Its ecstatic possibilities have been recognised by all cultures. Commentators speak of relationship of music to the human senses and the intellect thus *affirming the world of human discourse*.

Plato felt that there was correspondence between the character of a man and the music that represented him. We shall be taking this definition forward in assessing the character of a particular 'class' and the music representing that class.

Musical rhythms have a universal appeal but when words are grafted onto the musical rhythms then music loses its universal value and becomes an expression of particular thoughts, processes and actions. The history of music is largely an account of the '*adjunctive function*' in rituals and ceremonies of all kinds. Whether

these be religious, military, courtly, ritualistic or festival rites. Two or more listeners may derive very different meaning from the same piece of music.

Musical Meaning

Musical meaning and communication cannot exist in the absence of a cultural context for instance Jazz music would not have evolved in the USA or Africa. For Jazz is an expression of music of the African native who is isolated both socially and geographically from his natural environment. Amongst the West African tribes supplying slave trades, we saw the emergence of the 'blues' style of music that depicted depressed melancholic subjects.

From all this it should be pretty clear that music is a powerful vehicle for expressing thoughts and actions.

There are variety of musical types e.g. jazz, pop, rock, R'n'B, Hip Hop, Drum and Bass, Funky House, Opera, classical, just to list a few.

Bhangra Musical Style

Today, in Britain we are seeing a rapid emergence of Bhangra musical type. Its increasing influence of popularity is mainly contributed by the many Radio and TV channels now being operated and an urgent need felt by the 'Punjabi' Diaspora for self identity.

The origin of Bhangra style is unknown but generally associated with harvest time festival amongst the farming communities of the Punjab.

Bhangra Lyrics are always sung in the Punjabi language and generally cover social issues such as love, relationships, money, dancing, getting drunk and marriage. In this respect, Bhangra lyrics are no different from any other type of music.

Bhangra music is inextricably depicted as not just the music of the Punjabis but specifically, rightly or wrongly, as the music of farming classes of the Punjab called the 'jatts'.

I would add that not all farmers are jatts and not all jatts are farmers. Further, not all Punjabis are farmers and not all farmers are Punjabi. So why is the 'jatt' singled out in the lyrics of Bhangra Music.

Economic Historians will say this is feudalism pure and simple. The land owning classes derive power from land ownership. So music at harvest time doesn't merely manifest happiness but is also becomes a vehicle or a tool for self aggrandisement.

Farmers exist everywhere in all parts of the world. Harvest festivals are also celebrated in many countries. The question we have for the academics is this: is there a specific social group amongst the farming communities of the world who single themselves out like the 'jatt' does through music.

Two aspects arise:-

1. Farmers as an occupational category
2. Jatts as a social group

Taking the occupational category first, India has a unique distinction in the whole wide world of classifying occupational categories commonly acknowledged in the west as the *division of labour*. The Indian occupation with classification gave rise to a social system called The Caste System.

Caste and Social Hierarchy

Of the many definitions of caste the one generally accepted by the United Nations is that of occupation and descent. So, the caste has an occupational and a descent element.

Taking a quote from Raja Jayaraman's book 'Caste and Class: Dynamics of Inequality in Indian Society', he says that Caste System is '*a type of social stratification in which an individual's social status, that is his or her prestige and honour are determined by his or her birth into a particular Caste. He says, that this status is directly linked to his or her Caste Group within the hierarchy of Castes*".

Dr. B R Ambedkar (the Chief Architect of Indian Constitution) described the Caste System in his book 'Who were the Shudras *as a social hierarchy in which there is an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt*'. He says that this Hierarchy of inequalities is sanctified by the Hindu religion based on the Theory of Chaturvarna – the four fold division of society.

You get greatest reverence if you are at the top of the social hierarchy and the greatest contempt if you happen to be at the bottom.

Philosophers in ancient India in their search for an ideal society conceived of a fourfold division of society in the form of Chaturvarna. For example society was to be composed of the priestly class (Brahmins), The soldiers (the Kshatriyas), the traders (Vaishyas) and manual labourers (the Shudras). So, according to this scheme the farmers belong to the Shudra class. Outside the Chaturvarna system there is another group called the Ati-Shudras. These are referred to as the Untouchables or Dalits in modern parlance. I happen to call them the productive classes.

Because the Caste System is conceived as a social Hierarchy, each social group finds comfort and solace in the knowledge that there is someone below them unless you are a social group at the bottom of the social hierarchy. During the British Raj this group were referred to as the Depressed Classes.

So, the notion of a social hierarchy based on occupation and descent persists in modern times and also to an extent The Caste System as an institution also exists in Britain amongst Asian Diaspora and certainly is prevalent amongst the Punjabi Diaspora and is also practiced amongst the Sikhs.

But all that I have said above does not answer the question: Why the Jatt singles himself out in the context of Bhangra music.

Jatt Ancestry

In order to provide an answer to this question I have sought help from Professor Kalika Ranjan Qanungo from his book entitled *The History of the Jatts*.

He says, that a *jatt is jatt whether he is a Muslim, a Hindu or a Sikh*. Professor Qanungo admits that the origin of these enterprising people is enveloped in the mist of obscurity but makes pointed references to their Indo-Scythian, Indo-European, Indo-Aryan or even belonging to the Saka and Hun tribes. He goes on to conclude that there is no scientific ground, philological, or ethnological for rejecting his claim to the Indo-Aryan blood and that he is neither Scythian, nor a cross between a Brahmin and Kshatriya widow (Jathar) - as some have alleged. He is not a foreign invader either from the plains of central Asia or the fictitious *Jathar* mountain but [he] is a true son of India.

Professor Qanungo points to Malwa and Rajputana as the home of the ancestors of the jatts and claims that the Jatts descended from the ancient Yadava tribe. He claims the Jatts migrated to the Punjab and the trans-Indus region from Malwa and Rajputana regions of India. Professor Qanungo argues that Jatts are difficult to persuade that they descended from the ancient Yadavas. However the jatts continue to claim their Indo Aryan and/or Indo-Scythian stock. Therefore, the Jatt is promoted as a separate and distinctive tribal or pseudo racial group through the Bhangra music.

If the Jatts consider themselves to be a separate racial group what would the public reaction be if the Ku Klux Klan began to broadcast music on publicly licensed airwaves depicting *white* supremacy.

The Jatt claim to be a distinctive tribal or a racial group is an anathema to modern progressive society which is pretty much occupied with creating a class-less, caste-less society.

In year 2000, I wrote in an essay entitled *Caste in Britain*,

That ..the young British Asians are growing up in an admixture of Eastern and Western Culture. Having been exposed to affects of Racism, the young Asians are expressing their identity through capitulating into their own cultures.

I used examples to show how the young are reverting back to their communities in search of their own ethnic cultures. Those belonging to the so called higher castes view their superior social position as an advantage; a kind of social security; a kind of kinship amongst fellow Caste men. Having been victims of Racism themselves, the Asians are now animating Caste Consciousness.

I also indicated in that essay that Punjabi is the most commonly spoken language amongst the Asian and for too many young Punjabis the Bhangra music has proved to be the cultural refuge they were seeking to re-enforce identity and stereotypes.

There are many programmes dedicated to Bhangra music and many Punjabi folk believe that Bhangra music has been the restitution of their withering culture and view Bhangra as the saviour of the young from the clutches of the decadent West.

But these days I also observe that certain elements of Bhangra depicted through musical videos is also beginning to imitate the so called 'decadent' west. Jatt lyrics also now have a place in hip hop music - a non Bhangra style of music. So today, the Jatt now occupies a place in Hip Hop music.

Bhangra music is seen as the hallmark of a Punjabi. Let us beat the *dholak* and rid Bhangra music of Caste and Caste based lyrics. If steps are not taken now then young and future generations will continue to be influenced by the menace of Caste – a principle contrary to egalitarianism of Sikhism.

Inter-Caste Marriages

The second theme I have been requested to look at is that of Inter-caste marriages.

To borrow a phrase from anthropology, Castes are endogamous. In other words castes do not marry outside their caste groups. But an interesting feature is observed within Indian culture and certainly amongst the Punjabi's and that is in the observation of the system of *Gotra*. A Gotra follows a patriarchal blood line. There are rules that govern whether a marriage should occur within specific Gotra types. Gotra is usually signified by a family surname. Sometimes the Gotra is linked to a Caste but in my view this is incorrect because an identical Gotra can be found amongst different caste groups - sociologists should study this area.

A couple proposing to get married or whose marriage is being arranged must follow the rule that the boy's Gotra, his mother's, grandmother's and maternal grandmother's Gotra do not overlap with girl's Gotra or the Gotra of her mother, grandmother or maternal grandmother.

If there is an overlap then marriage is not allowed to proceed. If you breach this rule the marriage would be stigmatised or the couple could be killed because it is viewed as an incestuous marriage which the Indian society generally does not tolerate and therefore considered dishonourable. The code to marry or not to marry a particular partner can also extend to a whole village (in many parts of India) where a girl is disallowed from marrying someone from the same village irrespective of caste. But if a caste code is broken then the couple will surely face the wrath of not just the caste group for breaching the caste barrier but face the wrath of the whole village for breaching the village rule.

In modern times the rules governing Gotra is being relaxed and is only applied to cover the mother's Gotra and not that of the grandmother(s) on both sides of the equation.

The point that I wish to emphasise is this: that there is a clear social demarcation to marriage based on the Gotra rule not just the demarcation based on the caste code.

So, In Indian marriages two rules apply:

1. You must marry within the caste group (endogamy)
2. You must marry outside the Gotra rule (exogamy)

This is called superimposition of endogamy over exogamy. For the marriage to proceed the arrangement must be both endogamous (within caste) and exogamous (outside the Gotra),

The Gotra rule has an underlying biological basis that is to advance mixture of blood outside the social grouping in order to reduce chances of genetic diseases. Whilst the exogamous system appears to have a sound scientific basis but the endogamous system does not and is totally unscientific, artificial and irrational.

One of the reasons why the grandmother's Gotra is being gradually ignored in modern times is because there is a limited supply of potential partners because according to the caste code the marriage must occur within the caste (endogamous) but outside the Gotra rule albeit in a restricted form.

Through the relaxation of the Gotra rule, the scientific basis that of exogamy is being breached but that of the endogamous Caste relationship is being fully maintained and protected.

If the scientific exogamous rule was fully maintained and allowed to flourish then this alone could lead to the breakdown of the caste (endogamous) rule resulting in a rise of healthy offsprings with less occurrence of inherited genetic diseases.

However, I doubt whether the exogamous principle can be seriously advanced in modern society. Added to this is the complication that Sikhs are openly encouraged to relinquish the use of their surnames to avoid linkage with caste identities. This is to keep in line with the declaration and call of Shri Guru Gobind Singh Ji when he called upon his followers to adopt the usage of Singh and Kaur surnames. A difficulty arises with this in that a Gill could potentially marry another Gill. To avoid this difficulty many Sikhs have not relinquished their Gotra. If Gotra is not visibly adopted as a surname then the Gotra does become a consideration and still forms part of the parameter for a marriage to proceed. But it must be emphasised that the Gotra is not caste.

Further, If you look into the ethnic press like Desh Pradesh, Punjab Times etc., we see matrimonial sections carrying advertisement for partners primarily expressing caste preferences. The Gotra principle is only of secondary importance once caste principle is satisfied.

Religion and Hereditary basis of Caste

There are those who deny the hereditary basis of Caste. Dr. B R Ambedkar in his book entitled 'Who were the Shudras' paints a vivid picture and describes how in

Working towards a Caste Free Society
Sikh Education Forum

ancient times due to the conflict between Brahmins and Shudras the Brahmins pursued the progeny of inter-caste marriages by imposing strictures upon them.

Anulomas:

Father	Mother	Name of the Progeny
Brahmin	Kshatriya	Murdhavastika
Brahmin	Vaishya	Ambashtha
Brahmin	Shudra	Nishada
Kshatriya	Vaishya	Mahishya
Kshatriya	Shudra	Urga
Vaishya	Shudra	Karana

Pratilomas:

Father	Mother	Name of the Progeny
Shudra	Brahmin	Chandala
Shudra	Kshatriya	Kshattar
Shudra	Vaishya	Ayogava
Vaishya	Brahmin	Suta
Vaishya	Kshatriya	Vaidehaka
Kshatriya	Vaishya	Magadha

By reviewing the above table of the elaborate arrangement of mixed marriages and the resulting progeny of such marriages, this is what Dr Ambedkar says...

The Chandala and Nishada are the issues of mixed marriages. Nishada is an Anuloma while the Chandala is a Pratiloma. The Anulomas are held to be eligible for Upanayana (sacred thread ceremony) but curiously an exception is made to this rule. Nishada who is the son of a Brahmin from a Shudra woman, though an Anuloma, is held not to be eligible for upanayana. It is interesting to know why this exception is made. The only answer seems to be that this arbitrary act is an act of revenge against the children of one's enemy i.e. the Shudras.

Turning to the Pratilomas, Manu no doubt calls all of them (Shudras) as the basest of men. At the same time, the stigma on the Pratiloma is not evenly distributed amongst all of them. In the matter of rights and privileges, the Ayogava and the Kshattar are treated with incredible consideration, while the Chandala is subjected to unspeakable condemnation. An illustration of this discrimination in Manu Smiriti at x.46 says ...

Carpentering (shall be the occupation) of an Ayogava as to the Kshattar the Manu Smiriti at X.49 says .. catching and killing animals that live in holes (is the occupation) of Kshattar.

Compare with this what the Manu Smiriti has to say about the Chandala. A Chandala and a boar, a cock, and also a dog and a woman in her courses and a eunuch may not see a Brahmin eating.

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One may not abide with outcasts, nor Chandalas, nor Pukassas, nor idiots, nor proud (people), nor with the low born (people) nor with Antyavasayins e.g those who have been caused to live on the outskirts of a village.

One becomes pure by bathing if one has touched a Chandala, or a woman in her courses, an outcaste etc''

(It is curious that a woman is treated similar to a Chandala).

Manu Smirit at X.51 says that the dwelling of Chandalas and svapacas(should be) outside village; they should be deprived of dishes(apapatra); their property (consists of) of dogs and asses.

Inter-caste marriages traditionally are discouraged and frowned upon. As a consequence those who undergo inter-caste marriages, firstly face the wrath of parents and family. If the family agrees to an inter-caste marriage then the family may be scorned and shunned by the community sometimes resulting in social boycott if not family conflict. Very rarely are inter-caste marriages celebrated. There is always caste-centric gossip, innuendo and sometimes the couple are so traumatised this can lead to violence and sometimes death.

Recently, on Friday, 7th May 2010, The Independent newspaper reported how Kuldeep Kaur Sidhu, a pregnant newlywed was murdered in 2008 due to her low caste status.

No one should be made to suffer the pangs of Caste on grounds of Inter-caste marriage. Such marriages should be encouraged and celebrated not only by the families concerned but by the communities in general.

Inert-caste marriage can break down caste prejudice but this requires a societal transformation. We should all play our part. We should encourage an atmosphere where couples are free to marry not because their primary motive to break through the caste barrier but such that caste should not be allowed to be a feature in a relationship.

Finally, I wish to add that the Sikh faith has a solid ethos to actively combat caste based discrimination and it is only right that this issue has now been brought out to the forefront by the Sikh Education Forum. Caste is a taboo subject yet it occupies the mindset of most Asian communities. It will require talent, commitment and initiative to confront the issues raised. Certainly, Sikh faithful has a great inner strength that can be utilised to good effect in combating Caste based discrimination.

Thank You